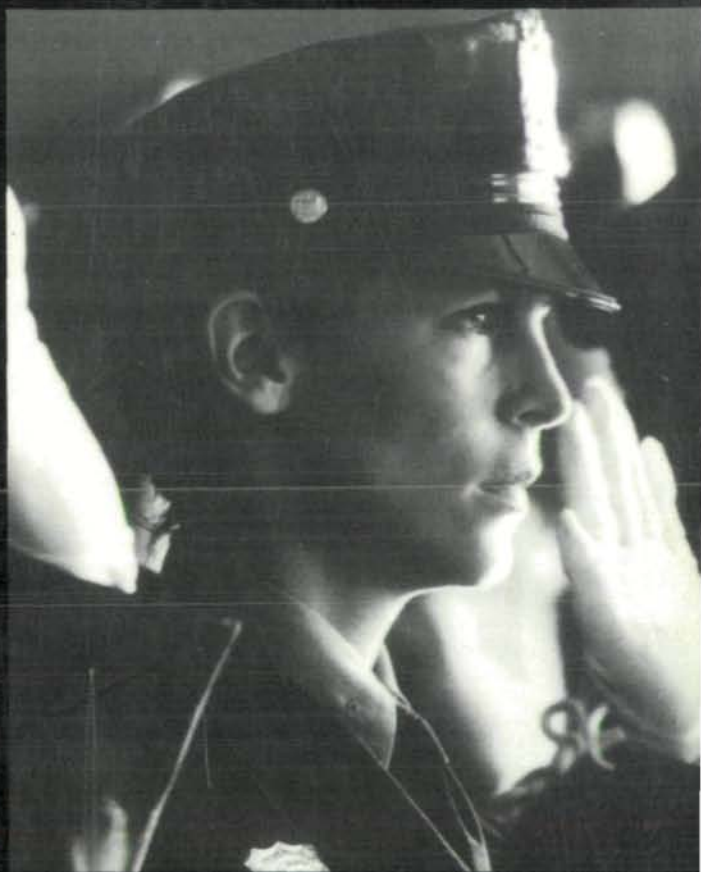


Screen



Kathryn Bigelow: blood on the borders

Housekeeping in Hollywood

Electronic vision and the gendered spectator

René Clair and Marcel Pagnol

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Archaeologies of electronic vision and the gendered spectator

WILLIAM BODDY

The current proliferation of digital imaging technologies, with virtual reality (VR) as their most technically elaborate and high-profile extension, has inspired new scholarly attention in film studies and elsewhere to the general relations between the histories of communication technologies and those of cultural forms. The historiographic challenge of Walter Benjamin's insight from 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' that 'during long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence' has increasingly been taken up by media historians crossing traditional academic disciplines. At the same time, Benjamin's materialist claim in the essay that 'the manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature, but by historical circumstances as well' invites a conception of technological history which eschews the conventional historiographic tropes of organic evolution or autonomous development.¹ Recent film and television scholarship in the USA and elsewhere has shown a new concern with the complex and ambivalent social reception of new media technologies. As film historian Tom Gunning argued in 1991:

In the recent historicizing of film study, placing film within a history of the reception of technology has emerged as a primary challenge . . . the new exploration of the history of technology is more than technical . . . technology can reveal the dream world of society as much as its pragmatic realization.²

1 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1973), p. 222.

2 Tom Gunning, 'Heard over the phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde tradition of the terrors of technology', *Screen*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1991), pp. 185.

Inspired by such broad methodological concerns, I would like to consider some of the complex genealogies of contemporary discursive constructions of new electronic media. In order to discern some of the larger ideological structures which guide the present figuration and reception of new electronic imaging systems, I would like to examine some of the continuities with which popular discourses in the USA have confronted changes in communication media over the past seventy years. Part of the challenge in addressing the range of technologies and discourses constituting the field of virtual reality in contemporary US culture is an almost wilful slipperiness of the object: a problem less of fixing a denotative meaning to 'virtual reality' (a computer-generated environment with which users may interact via a range of human senses) than of the seamless way in which popular and trade-press discussions of virtual reality frequently slip from technical accounts of the current state of the art into hypothetical phenomenological descriptions of currently unrealized electronic environments. As critic Vivian Sobchack has noted, even the most ardent VR boosters admit that it is more compelling to talk about what VR might someday become than to describe the current rudimentary and impoverished devices. The most vivid description of the VR experience, she and others argue, remains the fictional prose of cyberpunk novelist William Gibson.³ Rather than viewing this semantic slippage as a problem to be policed, however, it may be more productive to acknowledge, as media technology historian Carolyn Marvin argues, that 'media are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication.' Marvin calls on historians to move away from the traditional artifactual notion of communication technologies with its fixations on the instrument and the instrumental in an imputed teleology, which frequently consigns the past to a mute prehistory of current prevailing social applications of media technologies.⁴

This historiographic move beyond the technological artefact may be especially appropriate for the current case of virtual reality, often represented as merely the most compelling imaginative extension of an entire complex of technologies of television and electronic imaging. Australian critic Andy Darley, comparing the emergence of VR with that of cinema a century earlier, points out that 'computer imaging' is itself a complex term, its processes deployed in diverse contexts in design, advertising, cinema, television, and video, as well as in the military.⁵ As Darley argues, computer imaging has developed largely through a process of infiltrating or colonizing existing signifying practices which are already embedded in a diverse set of highly-developed cultural forms. Such media hybrids have collapsed the boundaries between electronic and photographic, static and moving, real and unreal. These transgressions have frequently

³ Vivian Sobchack, 'New age mutant Ninja hackers', *Artforum*, April 1991, p. 25.

⁴ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 4, 8.

⁵ Andy Darley, 'Big screen, little screen: the archaeology of technology', *Ten.8*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1991), p. 82.

6 On the ethical issues raised by computer imaging in electronic journalism, see Daniel Sheridan, 'The trouble with Harry', *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 1990, pp. 4, 6.

7 Peter Wollen, 'Cinema/Americanism/the robot', *New Formations*, no. 8 (1989), pp. 28-9.

8 Bill Nichols, 'The work of art in the age of cybernetic systems', *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1988), pp. 31-2.

9 Claudia Springer, 'The pleasures of the interface', *Screen*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1991), p. 318.

10 Erik Davis, 'TV's fascinating, frightening future', *The Utne Reader*, 48 (1990), pp. 86-7; Bill Powell, 'Interactive: the future is here', *Newsweek*, 31 May 1993, pp. 34-7.

destabilized conventional photographic, cinematic and televisual ontologies and professional codes, provoking, for example, new ethical debates over the use of digitally-created and manipulated images in 'truth-telling', indexically-coded image contexts such as journalism or the legal system.⁶ The institutional complexities of the uneven adoption of the various technologies of electronic imaging suggest the value of a widely-conceived approach to their forbearers and ideological determinants.

Peter Wollen distinguishes the essentially nineteenth-century communication technology addressed by Walter Benjamin from our own technological and cultural era which, he argues, can best be understood as 'not so much [that] of "mechanical reproduction" as "electronic intertextuality"'.⁷ The change has enormous implications for the rehearsal of notions of gender in contemporary US culture. Bill Nichols, in a 1988 article entitled 'The work of art in the age of cybernetic systems', contrasts the regimes of power and knowledge associated with mechanical reproduction with those characteristic of an era of computer imaging. Nichols argues: 'A (predominantly masculine) fascination with *control* of simulated interactions replaces a (predominantly masculine) fascination with the to-be-looked-at-ness of a projected image'.⁸ Pursuing these extensions of Benjamin's speculations into new 'modes of human sense perception', I would like to explore the social inscription of gender in contemporary discourses on enhanced television systems, computer imaging and virtual reality; to consider VR and its associated technologies, imaginative landscapes and social genealogies in the contexts of what Claudia Springer has identified as a contemporary 'crisis in masculinity' and widespread anxieties about technology.⁹ As the poster for the VR-enhanced hero of the 1992 feature film *Lawnmower Man* would have it: 'God Made Him Simple. Science Made Him a God'.

Underscoring the centrality of Nichols' identification of 'a (predominantly masculine) fascination with *control* of simulated interactions' in our era, the diverse set of contemporary media technologies – some actual, some envisioned – in applications ranging from broadband cable television, HDTV, 'Smart' TV and amusement park attractions to virtual reality are united by little more than their shared debt to various notions of 'interactivity', a term identified by one critic as 'already the soggy buzzword of the nineties' and more recently the subject of a *Newsweek* cover story.¹⁰ What is striking about the diverse discourses addressing the range of new electronic imaging technologies is the common claim that they promise to remake or destroy conventional television: to transform the scorned and degraded domestic television set into a good cultural object; to reinvest the pacifying, even feminizing (in)activity of consuming television with fantasies of (masculine) agency and power; even to reinvigorate US national will and industrial potency in the process.

It seems helpful to inquire, therefore, where this anxiety of influence and difference arises – where the ideological construction of television as unworthy, emasculating, and bad cultural object can be located historically. I believe its roots lie beyond the decades of US television's commercial introduction and growth in the mid twentieth century and extend to the rise of radio broadcasting in the twenties. Not only did US television largely inherit the commercial structures, programme forms and regulatory structures of commercial radio of the late twenties, but the larger cultural and gendered positioning of the television set in the home and of television viewing as a social activity owe a great deal to events in twenties radio. The mid-century utopian and dystopian fantasies around television pale alongside those provoked by the introduction of radio broadcasting decades earlier. The discursive, nonartefactual approach to the history of media technologies employed by historians like Tom Gunning, Carolyn Marvin, Susan Douglas, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch can help trace the genealogy of powerful ideas which still shape the reception of contemporary electronic vision systems.¹¹

Early radio broadcasting gained a powerful hold on popular imagination, in part because it was seen as the culmination of a series of marvellous inventions in transportation and communication – the railroad, the telegraph and telephone, the electric light, the photograph, the cinema – of what one raptuous 1920s radio commentator called 'the last decade of that great, forward-striding century, the nineteenth', when 'the western world – particularly among its northern races – was on the very verge of that complete individual mastery of nature towards which its creative minds had been working since the revival of learning some four centuries earlier'.¹²

The experimental uses of wireless since the 1890s moved quickly from conveying coded communication to voice and music, and to wireless images in the 1920s. Widespread television broadcasting was already impatiently awaited and, in any event, the wireless transmission of images in the imaginative literature and trade press of the twenties seemed prosaic alongside speculative applications of radio in communicating with the dead, directly from one brain to another, and with the planet Mars and beyond. Radio trade press writers in the twenties foresaw the general provision of wireless heating and lighting and the 'wireless fertilization of fields'.¹³ For some commentators, radio's technological goal was the wireless transmission of electric power itself, to serve individual needs and to operate large-scale factories; as one 1925 book had it, 'The triumph of mind over matter and the successful conquest of electricity will not have been realized until a system of power transmission without wires has been discovered'.¹⁴

As Susan Douglas has pointed out, in contrast to the anxiety and

11 For recent work on the reception of late nineteenth-century innovations in transportation and communication, see Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting: 1889–1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Frank A. Biocca, 'The pursuit of sound: radio, perception and utopia in the early twentieth century', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 10 (1988), pp. 61–79; Carolyn Marvin, 'Dazzling the multitude: imagining the electric light as a communications medium', in Joseph J. Corn (ed.), *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology, and the American Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Avital Ronnell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Lynn Kirby, 'Male hysteria and early cinema', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), pp. 113–31.

12 Paul Schubert, *The Electric Word: The Rise of Radio* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 3, 6.

13 See, for example, 'Are we getting radio signals from another planet?', *Popular Radio*, May 1922; Howard Carrington, 'Will we talk to the dead by radio?', *Popular Radio*, June 1922, p. 93; Howard Carrington, 'Are the dead trying to reach us by radio?', *Popular Radio*, July 1922, p. 188.

14 Samuel L. Rotheffel, Raymond F. Yates, *Broadcasting: Its New Day* (New York: Century, 1925), p. 267.

15 Douglas, 'Amateur operators and American broadcasting: shaping the future of radio', in Corn, *Imagining Tomorrow*, p. 35

16 Merlin Aylesworth, 'Report of the President', *Reports on Advisory Council* (New York: NBC, 1930).

17 J. M. McKibbin Jr, 'New way to make Americans', *Radio Broadcast*, January 1923, p. 238.

18 A. H. Corwin, 'Bright future for the dealer is assured', *Radio Dealer*, March 1923, p. 18.

resistance provoked by the social effects of industrialization and urbanization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, radio broadcasting was seen not only as exempt from these fears, but as an antidote to them.¹⁵ As such, speculation about early radio responded to a complex set of beliefs and interests about the social and gender orders and their preservation. Radio by the early twenties was seen as a panacea, or at least an ameliorative tool, to a spectrum of contemporary US social problems and conflicts, even promising the restoration of WASP rural hegemony over a new urban and immigrant nation of 120 million people. Radio broadcasting promised, according to NBC's president in 1930, a perfect means 'to preserve our now vast population from disintegrating into classes'. 'We must know and honour the same heroes, love the same songs, enjoy the same sports, realize our common interest in our national problems', he argued.¹⁶

In similar authoritarian terms, other early US observers saw radio as a potent instrument for national unity in an increasingly multicultural nation; as 'New ways to make Americans', an article in a 1923 trade magazine put it:

Today this nation of ours is slowly but surely being conquered, not by a single enemy in open warfare, but by a dozen insidious (though often unconscious) enemies in peace . . . Millions of foreigners were received into the country, with little or no thought given to their assimilation . . . Each is a parasite living upon the natural resources and under the protection offered by America, yet giving little or nothing in return. It is this process of nationality isolation within one country which is ruinous.

Until recently we have given little thought to the assimilation of the foreign element within our shores, but now the crisis is upon us; and we must face it without a great leader. Perhaps no man could mold the 120 million people into a harmonious whole, bound together by a strong national consciousness: but in the place of a superhuman individual, the genius of the last decade has provided a force – *and that force is radio*.¹⁷

Likewise, a writer in *Radio Dealer* in 1923 described the unique mobilizing power of radio as a new instrument of national political unity:

No longer will the roll of drums or the blare of bugles be needed to rouse the nation to arms. A single voice, spoken in Washington but heard throughout the length and breadth of the land, a voice vibrant with emotion, staunch with courage and ringing with authority will summon the nation to action, will wield a hundred million people into a solidarity such as the world has never known before.¹⁸

Just as radio was seen as offering the potential to anneal the

19 C. W. Taussig, *The Book of Radio* (New York: Appleton, 1922), p. 9.

20 Paul Nystrom, *Economic Principles of Consumption* (New York: Ronald Press, 1929), p. 440.

21 Herbert Hoover, 'A statement by Secretary Hoover on radio progress and problems', *Fourth National Radio Congress*, Washington DC, 9 November 1925, p. 11.

22 Elizabeth Bergner, 'Woman's part in radio', *Radio Age*, July/August 1922, p. 10.

troubling social cleavages of class and ethnicity of the industrial society which had produced it, the civic virtues of radio as a private hobby for both boys and men were likewise extolled in the trade press of the early twenties. Radio was seen as a palliative for the new stresses of contemporary US industrial and urban life; as the author of the 1922 *The Book of Radio* put it, 'Many neurologists are prescribing for their patients "hobbies". "Acquire a hobby and you won't require medicine", a prominent neurologist told a patient recently. No hobby is more suitable in general than radio.'¹⁹ Economist Paul Nystrom related the new importance of male hobbies to the enormous changes in the blue-collar and white-collar workplaces in his 1929 *Economics of Consumption*:

Activities quite naturally taken up during leisure times generally stimulate and satisfy instincts or human hungers that do not find adequate exercise in the activities connected with the practical and necessary sides of living. The routine worker confined to machine or desk, performing standardized operations, directed by unrelenting supervision, seeks an outlet for surplus energies in leisure activities, in freedom from control, in opportunity for creative effort, for self-expression and in exertion for the mastery and perhaps even the tyranny over others, compensating for the grind and humiliation of the regular work.²⁰

In its compensatory and socially positive effects, radio as a hobby was seen in contrast to the contemporary leisure innovations of the automobile and the motion picture, which were frequently decried for taking young people out of their homes and introducing them to new vices. As such, the hobby of radio in the twenties helped set up the gender and social constructions of the electronic media which still resonate today. Parallel to its function as an instrument of national unity, radio was celebrated at a more intimate level for promoting family unity and providing a socially-sanctioned male adolescent activity, albeit one that occasioned intermittent paternal anxiety. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, radio's Washington czar through 1927, proclaimed that 'Radio . . . has found a part in the fine development of the American boy, and I do not believe anyone will wish to diminish his part in American life'.²¹ A high school teacher advised in the trade press in 1922:

How many even consider the possibility of keeping the boy home at nights by giving him even the simplest of radio sets to play with? . . . If you are up against the problem of keeping boys in at nights, keeping them off the streets, just get a radio set as one for your home; it is inexpensive, and actually the expense is absolutely negligible if taken into account at all in comparison with the good it does to your boy.²²

The assembly of radio sets from low-cost electronic components

separately purchased or fabricated by the hobbyist was only part of the image of radio as an active, adventurous male leisure activity in the early twenties. The sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd wrote about the radio hobby in their study of the town of Muncie, Indiana in 1924:

Here skill and ingenuity can in part offset money as an open sesame to swift sharing of the enjoyments of the wealthy. With but little equipment one can call the life of the rest of the world from the air, and the equipment can be purchased piecemeal from the ten cent store. Far from being simply one more means of passive enjoyment, the radio has given rise to much ingenious manipulative activity.²³

²³ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1956), p. 269.

A popular metaphor for early radio listening was ‘fishing’, as men and boys intently teased out distant stations with battery-powered sets in attics and basements, using headphones which isolated them from other household activities. As historian Lynn Spigel has recently noted: ‘The radio enthusiasts . . . envisioned radio as an active sport . . . in which the participant gained a sense of mastery – and increased masculinity – by adjusting the dials and “reeling” in distant signals’.²⁴

²⁴ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 27.

The ambivalent paternal reaction to the degree of enthusiasm of some young radio hobbyists was underscored by the nationally-noted 1924 case of Eric Palmer Jr, whose father wrote to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) to request that his twelve-year-old son’s radio licence be withdrawn until he was sixteen. ‘If Junior’s licence is not suspended’, the father wrote, ‘I believe the boy will die of undernourishment and lack of sleep and his mother fall victim to a nervous breakdown. I do not believe he has seen the sunlight in three months.’ Young Palmer’s case was picked up by the national press, led by a front-page story in the *New York Times*, after the FRC suspended his licence with the following official advice: ‘We believe with your father that you need a good rest This is a marvelous field for the American boy, and such enthusiasm as you have displayed should as a rule be commended rather than discouraged, but in order to develop into a big, strong healthy boy you must have regular meals and your full quota of sleep.’ In an introduction to Palmer’s 1930 book about his radio adventures, FRC Chairman Ira Robinson nevertheless wrote in heroic terms of the male adolescent radio enthusiast: ‘Marconi opened the way in wireless but the amateurs found out much more. They were like those who followed the discovery of Columbus All hail to the boy in the attic.’²⁵ This ambivalent attitude of paternalistic pride and concern toward the adolescent electronics enthusiast has persisted in contemporary discursive constructions of the computer hacker, video game user, and VR fan.

²⁵ Eric Palmer Jr, *Riding the Airwaves with Eric Palmer Jr.* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), pp. 86, 115–17, introduction.

However, this definition of the radio listener and the radio market

²⁶ Ralph Sayre, 'Putting radio in the parlour', *Radio Dealer*, July 1923, p. 17.

²⁷ Gleason L. Archer, *The History of Radio to 1926* (New York: American Historical Society, 1938), p. 209.

²⁸ Harry Gawler, 'Radio in the home', *Radio Dealer*, June 1923, p. 20.

²⁹ Sayre, 'Putting radio in the parlour', p. 61.

³⁰ Christine Frederick, 'Ten suggestions to help dealers sell radio to women', *Radio Industry*, January 1925, p. 11; Sayre, 'Putting radio in the parlour', p. 61.

³¹ Archer, *The History of Radio to 1926*, p. 209.

³² W. L. Pollard, 'Possibilities of radio', *Radio Journal*, July 1922, p. 64.

as the male hobbyist in the USA began to change in 1923 as RCA, which controlled the major US patents in radio receivers, undertook to redefine and expand the radio-set market, moving away from the sale of parts piecemeal to hobbyists to more profitable sales of complete loudspeaker-equipped receiving sets in fine cabinets. The trade journal *Radio Dealer* in 1923 noted the change in targeted consumer from the 'parts buying fan' and advised radio retailers how to reach the new consumer: 'And, by all means, don't talk circuits. Don't talk in electrical terms You must convince every one of these prospects that radio will fit into the well appointed home.'²⁶ A contemporary broadcast historian described the new radio receiver design as a 'bold psychological move in the struggle to bring radio out of the attic and into the living room. And it worked.'²⁷

The RCA-led marketing shift was closely tied to issues of gender and modes of reception; as an RCA executive explained in 1923: 'To sell to the home, you must sell to the woman'. Justifying the shift in set design to feature loudspeakers, the executive argued that women would not tolerate headphones spoiling their hair styles.²⁸ Another radio executive described the housewife as 'the great American purchasing agent', responsible for eighty-five per cent of household's consumption decisions.²⁹ In a 1925 trade-press article, 'Ten suggestions to help dealers sell radio to women', business consultant Christine Frederick advised: 'For a long time women tolerated radio as a boy's and man's toy. But today radio is far more to women than a lot of messy machinery with which men and boys love to play and clutter up the house.' Frederick urged radio retailers to 'take a leaf out of the book of washing machine, gas range, vacuum cleaner and other makers and sellers of household equipment' and link the radio set to the status needs of the well-appointed home.³⁰

The shift in radio set design and marketing strategy in 1923 provoked sharp objections from radio amateurs, who saw it as part of a larger change in the nature of radio broadcasting and listening. Contemporary historian Gleason Archer described the 'personal scorn' the new receiving set met from amateur radio enthusiasts and the 'virtual feud [which] speedily developed'.³¹ Associated with the metamorphosis of the amateur radio set into parlour furniture were the efforts of AT&T and other large broadcasters to exploit airtime for advertising aimed at the same housewife-consumer to whom radio retailers were directing their new marketing efforts. Describing these programming shifts, an assistant editor of *Radio Journal* warned in 1922 that 'Many amateurs are looking with grave concern at the invasion of what they consider their own field by business concerns'.³² A 1922 editorial in *Radio Dealer* argued: 'The first result of any real attempts by advertisers to control the air will be and should be met by firm resistance When it comes to monopolizing the air for mercenary (advertising) purposes a real

33 'Editorial', *Radio Dealer*, April 1922, p. 30.

34 'Mistake to broadcast advertising', *Radio Dealer*, November 1922, p. 55.

35 Rotheffel and Yates, *Broadcasting: Its New Day*, pp. 139, 15.

36 Palmer, *Riding the Airwaves*, p. 16.

37 Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown*, p. 271.

38 Herman J. Hettinger, *A Decade of Radio Advertising* (1933. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1971), p. 18.

man-sized vocal rebellion can be expected'.³³ Responding to press reports of AT&T's plans to initiate advertising over their New York City station, the magazine's editorial writer warned in November 1922: 'The broadcasting stations themselves can expect interference from the thousands of amateurs who are licensed to send messages. . . . Trouble is bound to develop, not only for the broadcasting station, but for the trade itself.'³⁴ Some defenders of broadcast advertising cast the debate in equally stark terms: a 1925 book characterized radio amateurs as 'in general made up of boys in their teens who regard a transmitter as a toy befitting their age and social importance'. The authors complained of a surfeit of amateur broadcasters and warned: 'There is no altruism in broadcasting. It is a cold, commercial thing squirming under the unmerciful heel of exploitation . . . broadcasting must throw off the embarrassing yoke of universality and common ownership'.³⁵

The outcome of these battles over the design, domestic location, and function of the radio set, like those over the propriety of broadcast advertising, was clear by the end of the twenties when commercial radio took its now familiar place in the US home and commerce. As disgruntled amateur radio enthusiast Eric Palmer Jr wrote in 1930 from his now marginalized perch in the attic:

Modern broadcasting receivers are pretty much fool-proof. Even a baby can start 'em up.

We've got to what my dad calls the parlour stage of radio. What he means is that radio has gone ritzy, with fancy cabinets, to roost in the drawing room along with the curio cabinet and grandpa's picture. The idea is that radio has ascended from the attic era, or descended, rather, from the top floor corner to a position of state for the visitors to gape at.

But I'm still up in the attic. There are thousands more like me, all over the world.³⁶

Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd also noted the changing place of radio in the home in their 1924 Indiana study: 'As it becomes more perfected, cheaper and a more accepted part of life', the Lynds predicted, 'it may cease to call forth so much active, constructive ingenuity and become one more form of passive enjoyment'.³⁷ One industry observer noted the 'thrill of conquering time and space' enjoyed by amateurs intent on pulling in distant stations but, writing in 1933, admitted that 'this thrill is decidedly less than it was in the early days of broadcasting when it probably constituted the principle reason for listening'.³⁸ The characteristics of radio listening as an activity of adolescent male hobbyists – isolation and intensity, the fabrication of the technical apparatus itself, an interactive role as broadcaster or letter-writer to distant stations received – were increasingly marginalized by the emerging US industry's construction of the radio listener as distracted housewife.

These early discursive constructions of the gendered media consumer have held persistent sway in popular discussions of subsequent electronic media.

The distracted style of listening encouraged by loudspeaker-equipped sets in the parlour struck many early observers of US radio as novel; as one journalist noted, 'A majority of housewives turn on the radio in the morning "just for company" and let it rattle away with whatever comes . . . merely taking comfort in the human voice breaking the loneliness'.³⁹ In 1926 the president of the General Federation of Woman's Clubs and NBC advisor pointed to radio's 'importance among the facilities without which family isolation and stagnation are inevitable under modern conditions of life'.⁴⁰ At least in the USA, by the end of the decade, radio was firmly committed to the twin ideological projects identified by a scornful Bertolt Brecht in 1932 as that of 'prettifying public life' and 'bringing back coziness to the home and making family life bearable again'.⁴¹

The radio industry's model of the distracted housewife-listener had significant implications for broadcast programming; commercial broadcasters were advised to keep programmes simple, since the attention of listeners in the home was likely to be divided; 'besides', one industry executive argued, 'the average woman listener is neither cosmopolitan nor sophisticated. Nor does she have much imagination.' On the other hand, another early radio advertising executive offered optimistically, 'literacy does not figure. Mental effort is reduced to that involved in the reception of the oral message.'⁴² By the end of the twenties, commercial radio broadcasters, armed with such ideological assumptions of their imagined domestic audience, rarely designed programming to elicit or repay full or close attention; instead, as the author of the monograph *Women and Radio Music* argued, radio, like furniture or wallpaper, 'creates an atmosphere'.⁴³

The commercial exploitation of television two decades later presents a great degree of continuity with commercial radio's discursive constructions of its audience, as well as its financial imperatives and programming strategies. As the vice president of Philco remarked in 1945: 'Probably never before has a product of a great new industry been so completely planned and highly developed before it was offered to the public as has television'.⁴⁴ The would-be leaders of the new television industry, while forming the Television Broadcasters Association in 1944, asserted that the organization's 'prime objective . . . is to avoid any repetition of the errors that marked radio's beginnings in the roaring '20s'. In 1950 NBC network head and television pioneer Sylvester (Pat) Weaver wrote in an internal memorandum that 'Whereas in radio we had to find our way through hit or miss methods, we now have a pattern we believe will enable us, with great economy, to do a tremendous job in television without too much experimentation'.⁴⁵

³⁹ Edmund de S. Brummer, *Radio and the Farmer* (New York: Radio Institute for the Audible Art, nd.), p. 24.

⁴⁰ National Broadcasting Company, *Reports of the Advisory Council* (New York: National Broadcasting Company, 1927), p. 37.

⁴¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'Radio as a means of communication', reprinted in John Hanhardt (ed.), *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), p. 53.

⁴² Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York: Doubleday, 1929), p. 581.

⁴³ Peter W. Dykema, *Women and Radio Music* (New York: Radio Institute for the Audible Art, nd.) For a discussion of these changes in the 1920s radio industry, see William Boddy, 'The rhetoric and economic roots of the American broadcast industry', *Cinetacts*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1979), pp. 37–54.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Lyndon O. Brown, 'What the public expects of television', in John Gray Peatman, (ed.), *Radio and Business 1945: Proceedings of the First Annual Conference on Radio and Business* (New York: City College of New York, 1945), p. 136. For a discussion of the continuities between commercial radio and the early television industry, see William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), ch. 1.

⁴⁵ 'Television Broadcasters Association', *Television*, Spring 1944, p. 9; Pat Weaver, 'Television's destiny', 1950, p. 5. Collection of the NBC Records Administration Library, New York.

Nevertheless, the presumably more consuming and therefore more intrusive activity of watching a television broadcast in place of listening to a radio programme brought new gender-bound anxieties to leaders of the young television industry. One industry executive warned in 1945 that 'retuning a television set is far more difficult than a standard broadcast set. Women may not like the mechanics of television tuning.' The challenge to industry leaders was to integrate television viewing into competing activities in the home as radio had done, measured, as one executive starkly put it in 1945, by 'the degree to which housewives would drop their housework to watch television during the daytime'. Early industry leaders also worried that television in the home might undermine patriarchal authority within the family, wondering, for example, if 'the father of the house would be willing to have the lights turned out in the living room when he wants to read because his children want to watch a television broadcast of no interest to him'.⁴⁶ However, as in the earlier case of radio, television broadcasters quickly devised programme formats differentiated by time-of-day and imputed gendered audience, tailoring highly-segmented programme styles with low visual involvement to hours when the housewife was the presumed primary audience.⁴⁷

As historians Lynn Spigel and Cecilia Tichi have recently outlined, television viewing in the USA has persistently been figured as a passifying, emasculating, and feminizing activity.⁴⁸ Spigel quotes Philip Wylie's 1942 bestseller, *A Generation of Vipers*, which attacked the supposed alliance of female radio listeners ('moms') and Madison Avenue advertising executives in language recalling the soldiers of Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*:

The radio is mom's final tool, for it stamps everyone who listens to it with the matriarchal brand . . . our land is a living representation of the . . . fact worked out in matriarchal sentimentality, goo, slop, hidden cruelty, and the foreshadow of national death.⁴⁹

In the twentieth printing of Wylie's book in 1955, the author added the following footnote on the continuity between radio and television:

In place of, 'radio', of course, the alert reader will now automatically substitute 'TV' . . .

[Mom] will not rest until every electronic moment has been bought to sell suds and every programme censored to the last decibel and syllable according to her self-adulation – along with that . . . of her de-sexed, de-souled, de-celebrated mate.⁵⁰

As contemporary theorist Andreas Huyssen and others have argued, mid-twentieth-century attacks on television viewing as feminizing echo long-running discursive constructions of popular culture as

⁴⁶ Quoted in Brown, 'What the public expects of television', p. 137.

⁴⁷ For recent analyses of the operation of such gendered programme assumptions, see Tania Modleski, 'The rhythms of reception: daytime television and women's work', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology* (Frederick MD: University Publications of America/American Film Institute, 1983), pp. 67–75; Rick Altman, 'Television/Sound' from Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 39–54.

⁴⁸ See Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, ch. 2; Cecilia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) especially chs 1 and 3.

⁴⁹ Philip Wylie, *A Generation of Vipers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), pp. 214–15, quoted in Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, p. 62; also see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ Wylie, *A Generation of Vipers*, pp. 213–14.

51 Andreas Huyssen, 'Mass culture as woman: modernism's other', in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Tania Modleski, 'Femininity as mas(s)querade: a feminist approach to popular culture', in Colin McCabe (ed.), *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986); Patrice Petro, 'Mass culture and the feminine: the place of television in film studies', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Spring 1986), pp. 5-21.

52 Helene Cixous, 'Castration or decapitation', trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1981), p. 44, quoted in Petro, 'Mass culture and the feminine', p. 6.

53 John Schwartz, 'The next revolution', *Newsweek*, 6 April 1992, p. 45.

54 'Are new realities more or less real?', *US News and World Report*, 28 January 1991, p. 59.

55 Peggy Orenstein, 'Get a cyberlife', *Mother Jones*, May/June 1991, p. 63. Typically contrary, cyberpunk novelist William Gibson told the Cyberthon crowd when asked if VR would be an electronic utopia: 'I think it could be lethal, like free-basing American TV . . . I don't think that anyone that read my book seems to have understood it. It was supposed to be ironic. The book was really a metaphor about how I felt about the media. I didn't expect anyone to actually go out and build one of those things.' Orenstein, 'Get a cyberlife', p. 64.

56 Schwartz, 'The next revolution', p. 42.

57 Ibid.

58 Powell, 'Interactive: The future is here', p. 35.

feminine, often in opposition to a valorized and masculinized traditional high culture.⁵¹ Central to such constructions is a persistent gender-inflected opposition between passivity and activity. Patrice Petro quotes the French theorist Helene Cixous: 'Every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems . . . is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourses as "natural", the difference between activity and passivity'.⁵²

The deepseated gender and cultural positioning of domestic television as object and activity sketched historically here has served as a remarkably consistent foil for contemporary enthusiasts of the range of advanced electronic vision systems which include virtual reality; what a chorus of diverse commentators have called 'television's second chance'. *Newsweek's* April 1992 *Wayne's World* cover story on new television technologies quotes Apple Computer CEO John Sculley: 'Television's going to get a second chance, and there's a chance to do it right this time'.⁵³ Thirty-one-year-old virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier told *US News and World Report*: 'The best thing about VR is that it will kill TV'.⁵⁴ Lanier told a group of VR fans at a Cyberthon convention in San Francisco in 1991: 'We live in this very weird time in history where we're passive recipients of a very immature, noninteractive broadcast medium. Mission number one is to kill TV'.⁵⁵

Furthermore, television's technological 'second chance' is often represented in contemporary discourses as a reprieve for the USA in its bid for supremacy in international high-tech industries. Such reassuring national metanarratives may find wide resonance in the USA at a time when even the wide-eyed 1992 *Newsweek* article confessed:

You remember the future, right? When we were kids, comic books and 'Star Trek' readied us for some kind of gleaming techno-paradise. So far, the future hasn't delivered. Technology hasn't yet solved any of the really Big Problems – you know, poverty, war and injustice. High-tech industries we saw as our great hope have been mastered by determined foreign rivals. We can't even control the technology in our own homes, which is why our VCRs are still blinking 12:00 . . . 12:00 . . . 12:00 . . .⁵⁶

But now, the *Newsweek* cover article insists, the convergence of computers, telecommunications and consumer electronics promises 'an explosion of supergadgets and services that could change all our lives. As toy-loving cover boys Wayne and Garth might say, really excellent tech'.⁵⁷ In a similarly optimistic vein, the opening paragraph of the May 1993 *Newsweek* cover story on interactive technologies invoked the heroic American West, another era of 'virgin territory and a future that was literally there for the taking'.⁵⁸ An advertisement for an issue of *Forbes* business magazine with a cover

⁵⁹ Advertisement appearing in *The New Yorker*, 6 April 1992, p. 41.

⁶⁰ George Gilder, 'Smart TV', *Forbes*, 14 October 1991, p. 188.

⁶¹ George Gilder, *Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life* (Knoxville: Whittle, 1990), p. 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶³ A.J.S. Rayl, 'Making fun', *Omni*, November 1990, pp. 47–8.

⁶⁴ Springer, 'The pleasures of the interface', pp. 303–18.

story on 'Smart TV' put it starkly: 'Silicon Valley, this is your wake-up call'.⁵⁹ Economist George Gilder's *Forbes* article, after describing the US loss of the consumer electronics market to Japanese manufacturers as a telling symbol of industrial USA in decline, nevertheless offered readers some hope: 'But a second chance looms. Over the next few years there will be sweeping technological changes that will create a window of opportunity for American companies and a window of vulnerability for the Japanese . . . a worldwide electronics market worth hundreds of billions of dollars will be at stake. It will dwarf the present home entertainment market, which the Japanese control.'⁶⁰

Gilder opened his 1990 book on the same theme, *Life After Television*, with an alarming sketch of the social and geopolitical stakes of the battles over new video technologies:

As the 1980s roared and tumbled to a close, sirens wailed and moods darkened in Japanese-America relations For the first time since World War II, the underpinnings of friendship and prosperity between the US and Asia appeared to be in serious jeopardy A consensus emerged that the US was a graying and gullible nation, slipping into churlish senility, and that Japan was a mercantilist shyster, seizing power by unfair trade.⁶¹

Gilder went on to promise his readers that 'The death of television . . . would be the salvation of American competitiveness'.⁶²

Much of the contemporary discussion of the entire spectrum of electronic high tech has been inflected with the rhetoric of the remasculinization of the television apparatus through fantasies of power and control: a rhetoric of technological terror and promise for a masculinity under siege. Jaron Lanier told an interviewer, 'The whole point of Virtual Reality is to make people feel powerful When you're a kid, you get the shocking realization that you're not all-powerful. You learn that you can't bend the world to your own wishes, and adulthood sets in. We never recover from that.' VR, according to Lanier, 'gives adults technological permission to return to childhood'.⁶³ Claudia Springer has examined the sexual politics of the current interest in the merging of body and machine in films like *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) and *Eve of Destruction* (Duncan Gibbins, 1991), linking it both to western culture's long-expressed ambivalence of desire and aversion toward the human body and what she sees as a contemporary crisis in masculinity and its representation.⁶⁴ Much of the discourses around VR share these rhetorical and psychoanalytic features with contemporary science fiction in films, novels and comics.

A major strand of contemporary interest in VR is utopian; Lanier and other VR visionaries have celebrated VR as not only the technological leveller of prejudices of gender, age, and physical

appearance, but as the mechanism for extinguishing language, sexual difference, and even species differentiation. 'Virtual Reality is the ultimate lack of race or class distinctions or any other form of pretense, since all form is variable', Lanier told the San Francisco Cyberthon audience.⁶⁵ Lanier told one journalist he imagined 'a world of "postsymbolic communication", a world without words', evoking, perhaps, less the postsymbolic than the Lacanian presymbolic in a denial of sexual difference.⁶⁶ Elsewhere Lanier spoke of using VR as an instrument of self-transformation, allowing its user to 'trade eyes' with another person, even to swap nervous and motor systems with another species such as a lobster: 'The interesting thing about being a lobster is that you have extra limbs. We found that by using bits of movement in the elbow and knee and factoring them together through a complex computer function, people easily learned to control those extra limbs. When we challenge our physical self-image, the nervous system responds very quickly.'⁶⁷

As Vivian Sobchack argued in a 1991 *Artforum* article, the VR motto 'reality isn't enough anymore' might be psychoanalytically recast as 'reality is too much right now', and she called some of the current fascination with virtual reality 'a potentially dangerous and disturbingly miscalculated attempt to escape the material space and specific politics (dare I say the "real" reality?) of the body's mortality and the planet's fragility'.⁶⁸ Citing cyberpunk fanzine *Mondo 2000*'s description of cyberspace as 'like having your everything amputated', Sobchack sees in the anxious rejection of the human body a reaction to contemporary fears of mortality in the face of AIDS, nuclear annihilation and ecological suicide.⁶⁹ Journalist's Sally Tisdale's account of the 1991 San Francisco Cyberthon concludes with the rueful observation about the computer-generated environments she sampled: 'There is something terribly familiar about the flying pillars and smashed television sets, something smacking of comic books and Saturday-morning cartoons . . . Here is a technology with massive power, stuck in the tiny paradigm of the white American male.'⁷⁰

Many commentators have noted the connections between the cyberpunk and hacker communities from where much of the popular press interest in VR has flowed and a wider new age-inflected interest in psychotropic 'smart' drugs, recalling the era of sixties psychedelia. John Barlow, writing in *Mondo 2000*, argues: 'The closest analogue to virtual reality that I know is the psychedelic experience, and, in fact, cyberspace is already crawling with delighted acidheads'.⁷¹ The connection is underscored by popular press reports of the former acid head turned VR enthusiast Timothy Leary's prominent efforts on behalf of VR; a profile 'distress[ing to] . . . serious pioneers in the new technology', according to *Fortune* magazine.⁷² Leary told one interviewer:

⁶⁵ Orenstein, 'Get a cyberlife', p. 63.

⁶⁶ Sallie Tisdale, 'It's been real', *Esquire*, April 1991, p. 147.

⁶⁷ Bennett Davis, 'Grand illusions', *Discover*, June 1990, p. 41.

⁶⁸ Sobchack, 'New age mutant Ninja hackers', pp. 24–5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25; for a collection of *Mondo 2000* writing on VR, see Rudy Rucker, R.U. Sirius and Queen Mu, *Mondo 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 262–75.

⁷⁰ Tisdale, 'It's been real', p. 147.

⁷¹ John Barlow, quoted in Rucker et al., *A User's Guide to the New Edge*, p. 262.

⁷² Leary's role was described 'as a virtual reality barker', in Judith Stone, 'Turn on, tune in, boot up', *Discover*, June 1991, p. 35; Gene Bylinsky, 'The marvels of virtual reality', *Fortune*, 3 June 1991, p. 142.

Virtual reality means we won't have to lug our bodies around anymore! The only function of the human body of the future will be for acts of grace! Barriers of class and geography will fall! Kids in the inner city will be moving their brain anywhere they like! . . . The only reason to use cars and planes will be for sports and pleasure. You're saying no, no, no. But what if I had said to you a hundred years ago, 'In the future we'll only use horses for sports and to show off our elegance?'⁷³

'Our aim is to get the system as inexpensive as a pair of Nikes', Leary has said; 'If kids in the inner city can have Nikes, we'll see to it they have this technology!'⁷⁴

While Leary's born-again VR proselytizing may provide a nostalgic buzz of sixties mind-expansion and social activism, VR's discursive link with sixties psychedelics also carries some less savoury associations. While the covert history of psychedelic drugs reveals early ties to US military and covert intelligence research, the links between Pentagon spending and computer-imaging technologies is one of near paternity.⁷⁵ Like some time-warped sixties acid pioneer, contemporary VR partisans sometimes speak with a near religious fervour, such as Thomas Furness who, after spending twenty years working for the US Air Force on artificial environments, told an interviewer in 1991: 'With the technology of virtual reality we can change the world . . . I'm like an evangelist . . . It requires a kind of religious fervour at this point to get the word out.'⁷⁶ Furness's work with the Air Force included a 1981 F-16 flight simulator, including a five-million-dollar helmet, along with eight computers to run it.⁷⁷ Each technological strand of advanced television and computer imaging – flat-panel displays, computer hardware and software, fibre optics – was similarly the product of substantial and sustained US military research and development expenditures.⁷⁸

In another discursive context, given the intimate involvement of the US military in the development of the technologies of VR and advanced television systems, it is inviting to consider the current VR-inspired major advertising campaign for the US Marine Corps. The issues of the representation of the body, male fantasy, and electronic technology have been remarkably condensed in the Marine Corps' recruitment campaign, presumably targeting Leary's young Nike purchasers. The current advertisement campaign, produced before, but aired after, the US–Iraq War of 1991, signalled the Marine Corps' efforts to address hard-to-reach teenage males; the effort included similar trailer advertisements in US movie theatres and print advertisements in *Dirt*, a new magazine for teenage boys, described by its twenty-three-year-old editor as devoted to 'sports, music, art, chicks, cars, celebrities, style, motorcycles, females, global issues, current events, women, junk food, video games and stone cold babes'.⁷⁹

⁷³ Stone, 'Turn on, tune in, boot up', p. 33; Andrew Ross placed Leary's interest in VR in a typology of radical critiques of technology at a paper delivered at 'Ideologies of Technology' at the Dia Foundation for the Arts, New York, 12 April 1992.

⁷⁴ Stone, 'Turn on, tune in, boot up', p. 33.

⁷⁵ See Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), especially ch. 1.

⁷⁶ Davis, 'Grand illusions', p. 36.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Herbert I. Schiller, 'Media, technology and the market: the interacting dynamic', paper delivered at 'Ideologies of Technology' at the Dia Foundation for the Arts, New York, 10 April 1992, np.

⁷⁹ Cyndee Miller, 'Will *Dirt* fly? Only time will tell', *Marketing News*, 14 October 1991, p. 2.

⁸⁰ Barbara Lippert, 'The Marines' chessboard in the sand', *Adweek*, 25 March 1991, np.

⁸¹ Ibid.; the production information comes from a telephone conversation with a staff member of the commercial's production company, GMS, 4 December 1991.

⁸² Nicholas Valery, 'Consumer electronics: purveyors of dreams', *The Economist*, 13 April 1991, p. 50.

Presumably aimed at a similar demographic target, the new Marine Corps' television spots encountered a sceptical reaction from some in the advertising trade press. Columnist Barbara Lippert wrote in *Adweek*: 'This commercial is in a Twilight Zone of its own A bizarre mixture of teenage male fantasies, it suggests Darth Vader, heavy metal laser shows, Nintendo, Dungeons and Dragons, all stirred up by the possibility of mind-altering drugs. There's also some medieval weekend-festival garb thrown in, oddly enough. Parents have sued rock groups for less; Tipper Gore would not be amused.'⁸⁰

The Marine Corps' commercial was made on a two million dollar budget, with a hundred-person crew; despite the producer's intention to create a news-free 'symbolic, metaphoric approach', Lippert, for one, was troubled by echoes of the Gulf War which competed for US airtime with the commercial's launch: 'Unlike those military news conferences that showed carefully edited videotapes of smart bombings (no shots of eviscerated Iraqis allowed), this brings the idea of "collateral damage" to new techno-surreal heights'.⁸¹ Shot in the same desert location as the original *Star Trek* television series, the commercial presents a dizzying pastiche of pop culture and techno-subculture imagery of the contemporary US adolescent male.

Far from the military-funded technological cutting edge of VR, the more prosaic world of consumer electronics advertising has also reinvested the ubiquitous domestic television set with new masculine scenarios of interaction and mastery. In part, this marketing shift reflects precisely the dearth of technological innovation in a largely stagnant consumer electronics industry. *The Economist* magazine's 1992 survey of the international consumer electronics market identified several major decade-long product innovation cycles in home electronics since 1920 (including the gramophone in the twenties; radio in the thirties; black-and-white television in the fifties; colour television in the sixties; audio equipment in the seventies; and the VCR in the eighties) and wondered: 'What next? Before the VR machine can become the breadwinner for the industry (probably in the early 2000s), history suggests there will be a blockbuster product in between.' The promise of product innovation, according to the magazine, has led to a frantic search by hardware manufacturers for the 'next big thing,' including pocket camcorders, DAT, satellite television, and HDTV. In spite of these efforts, *The Economist* predicted tough times for the consumer electronics industry; in a weak global economy and without major new products on the near horizon, manufacturers face jaded and saturated consumers.⁸²

Reflecting the subdued state of the consumer electronics industry in the post-VCR age, in a 1984 interview entitled 'Design vs. Technology', Michael Schulhof, head of Sony-USA, argued that

83 Michael Schulhof, 'Design vs. technology', *Design News*, 3 December 1984, p.11.

cutting-edge consumer electronics technology 'is an indispensable entry fee for the competitive marketplace. But since all players pay it, technology doesn't separate winners from also-rans. That is the function of design.' Citing the successful innovations of the Sony Walkman and Watchman, which originated from designers, not engineers, and used largely off-the-shelf technologies, Schulhof called consumer electronics a 'technologically mature' industry, arguing that technological leadership is now measured in days or months, not years, and in any event doesn't guarantee market leadership: 'It is a fleeting thing at best, and not something on which to build a company's design or market strategy', Schulhof said of such leadership.⁸³ Even in the divergent marketing contexts of consumer electronics and military recruitment, however, the figuration of masculinity and technology in contemporary television advertisements speaks to similar concerns.

Partly as a result of the paucity of genuinely new consumer electronics products for the home, the current television advertisement campaigns from electronics manufacturers have reinvested existing prosaic products like remote-control televisions with new scenarios of masculine power, as in Sony's 1992 'Portrait' commercial for their XBR television sets. The classical music, the affluent but bohemian mise-en-scene, but especially the condensation of quotidian manipulation of a television's remote control with the active, creative, and domineering high-art scenario of artist and model (the television's remote control becomes both the artist's brush and conductor's baton synchronized with the music) all seek to reassure the male television consumer that he remains uncontaminated by the traditional emasculating associations of television viewing.

In a related marketing strategy, the solitary male viewer in the Pioneer Home Theatre commercial is first sketchily located in the prosaic mise-en-scene of cosy television armchair only to be transported out of the domestic space through his interaction with the 'new' television technology. Enacting a fantasy of the VR experience, the commercial dramatizes the recurrent ambivalence of terror and comfort provoked by new media technologies and phenomenologies, doubly ironic since here the couch-potato-turned-combatant is the near casualty of the exterminating machines of the dystopic *Terminator 2* he has conjured into his living room. The terrors of too-complete interaction with the vision of the anything-but-benign technological future are briefly evoked, then dispelled by the comforting return to the domestic space, albeit with lingering collateral damage to his television armchair, icon of television's stubborn and problematic domesticity.

These marketing efforts by consumer electronics manufacturers to associate the domestic television set with new scenarios of multisensory interaction and masculine control suggest a revival of

the 'home theatre' marketing model of the fifties. Lynn Spigel recently argued that 'virtual reality is not only being extolled as an escape from the mundane social world, it is also being implemented as an improved form of "new age" domesticity where people can literally enter another world while remaining in the safety of their private homes'. Citing the contemporary popular discourses of technologically-enhanced television that once again offer 'consumers an electronic cornucopia that promises to solve social problems and replace the doldrums of everyday life with thrilling, all-encompassing entertainment spectacles', Spigel reports a feeling of historiographic *deja vu*. The point, however, she notes, 'is not to argue that history repeats itself, but rather that the discursive conventions for thinking about communication strategies are very much the same . . . our culture still speaks about new communication technologies in remarkably familiar ways'.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, pp. 186, 182.

This sense of historical *deja vu* has been echoed in recent scholarship. In his analysis of early cinematic expressions of popular anxieties arising from the new media of transportation and communication at the end of the nineteenth century, Tom Gunning also sees a parallel with our own media age: 'Now at the close of another century, with new technological topologies confronting us, I believe we look back at the first experiences with technology with an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*. Not only do we confront the same ambivalence of optimism and anxiety, but the scenarios constructed around these primal ambiguities seem even more clearly legible.'⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Gunning, 'Heard over the phone', p. 185.

If tracing such ambivalent scenarios is one way to discern some of the forces shaping our technological future, the task is a complicated one. Walter Benjamin's project of relating 'the mode of human sense perception' to 'changes . . . [in] humanity's entire mode of existence', is especially challenging given the rapid technological changes and multiple discursive contexts of contemporary communication media. It is far from clear, for example, in what form VR systems will meet their eventual spectator-participant in the living room, dildonics-chamber, workplace, amusement park, public auditorium or battlefield. In any event, it is important to recognize the complex nature of historical determination, and nondetermination; as Bertolt Brecht wrote about radio in 1932: 'In our society one can invent and perfect discoveries that still have to conquer their market and justify their existence; in other words discoveries that have not been called for'.⁸⁶ In such a model of ambiguous determination, it is important to consider the historical agency of the ephemeral, fantastic, and utopian discursive responses to new communication technologies as well as their more materialist determinants in our culture.

⁸⁶ Brecht, 'Radio as a means of communication', p. 55.

Housekeeping in Hollywood: the case of *Craig's Wife*

KATHLEEN McHUGH

¹ Claire Johnston, 'Dorothy Arzner: critical strategies' and 'Approaching the work of Dorothy Arzner' in Constance Penley (ed.) *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Judith Mayne, 'Female authorship reconsidered' in *The Woman at the Keyhole* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

² Jacqueline Suter 'Feminine discourse in *Christopher Strong*', in Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory*.

³ Lucy Fischer argues that Judy in *Dance, Girl, Dance* 'rejects the role of fetishistic object ...' in Lucy Fischer (ed.), *Shot/Countershot* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 153.

⁴ One silent version was made in 1928 with the same name and in 1950, a remake entitled *Harriet Craig* featured Joan Crawford in the lead.

⁵ Mary Beth Haralovich, 'The social history of film: heterogeneity and mediation', in *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1986), p. 5. See also Robert Allen and David Gomery, 'Social film history', in *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), pp. 153–89.

Dorothy Arzner's unique position as a woman director in the classical Hollywood cinema has rendered her films of special interest to feminist film scholars. The primary texts of her oeuvre – *Christopher Strong* (1933), *Craig's Wife* (1936), and *Dance Girl Dance* (1940) – have served as the starting points for critical speculations on female authorship,¹ for the problem of recuperation and feminine discourse,² and for a reconsideration of the problem of fetishism.³ My work on Arzner's version of *Craig's Wife*⁴ takes a somewhat different approach, considering the film's representation of housekeeping in a specific social–historical context. Drawing from recent critical work on the social history of film I would like to suggest the ways in which this film participated in 'the production and distribution of social knowledge' about women's changing domestic roles in the USA in the twenties and thirties. A social–historical approach to film texts assumes that they emerge from and operate within a complex and often contradictory array of social forces and institutions. These forces include all the variables which comprise the film industry as a mode of production, the text as a consequence of these factors, the media, and the social and critical contexts of reception of a given film.⁵ My focus on housekeeping will limit my discussion of the text, its industrial context, its reception, and its social milieu to relevant considerations of appropriate domesticity.

The text of *Craig's Wife* actually promotes itself as documentation of a certain social type, of an inappropriate wife who doesn't know her 'place'. In a scene which presages the film's crisis, Walter Craig's

aunt attempts to convince him that his wife Harriet is a danger to him. Despite her many assertions of Harriet's flaws, Walter remains sceptical. Finally she tells him about an incident she accidentally overheard at a restaurant: 'I was lunching in town last week when a man you used to know came in with his wife. They didn't see me. The woman proceeded to tell the man how he should sit down and what to do when he was down and so on. Finally the man said to her "Say, who do you think you are, Craig's wife?"'

Citing the film's title as well as alluding to its protagonist, this anecdote both opens up the Craig home to the consensual scrutiny of public opinion and names Harriet Craig as an exemplar of inappropriate domesticity to its audience. Within the film, Walter Craig's private opinion of his marriage is exposed as false by the more knowing voice of his community. From the particular instance of Walter Craig's wife, the film identifies a generalized type – a domineering, emasculating woman obsessively attached to her home – and proposes its own title as an appropriate label for such women. Reviews written upon the film's release acknowledge this extratextual significance and suggested that its social resonance would heighten the film's appeal. *Variety* wrote:

Every neighbourhood has its Mrs Craig whose husband is a sympathetic concern for other women, and the picture is bound on this score to get considerable box office stimulating chatter. Men will secretly hope that overly meticulous wives [sic] will see the show and that also should nudge the gate.⁶

The *Motion Picture Herald* concurred: 'Some who witness it see in its principal character a composite portrayal of women they know'.⁷

These reviews demonstrate, in a limited sense, the film's efficacy in the production and distribution of social knowledge. The film's representation of an inappropriate wife obviously accords with prevailing social conventions and ideas about domesticity. The reviews also assume that the film will generate conversation about its subject, and they acknowledge and perpetuate the idiom 'Mrs. Craig' as representative of a certain social type. Yet these reviews accept the demonization of Harriet Craig and 'women like her' at face value whereas the film suggests a more complex story.

The paradox of a woman's proper place shapes the dominant conflict of both the film *Craig's Wife* and the play from which it was taken, written in 1926 by George Kelly. In both versions, Harriet Craig's belief that she should be the dominant force in her home is challenged and overturned by the narratively sanctioned view that a wife's place is to love and be subject to her husband in *his* home. The narrative uses Harriet's obsessive housekeeping to structure this conflict. But if placed and analyzed within the historical context of twenties and thirties America, *Craig's Wife* tells a very different story. In my reading, the film stages a 'fixed' debate, using the

⁶ *Variety*, 'Craig's Wife', 13 September 1936.

⁷ *Motion Picture Herald*, 'Craig's Wife: character drama', 19 September 1936.

moral structures of melodrama, between two historically chronological versions of marriage and domesticity. During the period in which both the play and the film were produced, ideas about marriage and domesticity underwent significant transformations due to the reconceptualization of women's domestic role. The narrative of *Craig's Wife* registers these changes by dramatizing them as a moral conflict. In so doing, it mystifies and effaces the historical relationship between two different paradigms of domesticity; the earlier version, represented by Harriet Craig, becomes an immoral alternative to, rather than the historical antecedent of, the more modern version. My reading of this text links interpretations of its use of genre, its mise-en-scene and narrative structure, with images and ideas concerning domesticity drawn from a wider social context. I will begin by making some general observations about Hollywood's visualizations of housework.

8 D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) presents a striking exception. The girl's (Lillian Gish) very limited prospects are represented by an exhausted housewife bending over her wash, surrounded by many unkempt children and an irate husband. The housewife advises the girl never to marry.

9 James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 87.

Hollywood films, with few exceptions,⁸ do not present images of housekeeping as a type of work, but instead use these images for their emotional or symbolic resonance. In *All that Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), Jane Wyman's character pensively dries a coffee cup as she discusses her romantic troubles with her close friend, played by Agnes Moorehead. Her action, wiping round and round the cup, serves as both a realistic detail and as an apt visual metaphor for the trapped, circular movement of her feelings and thoughts. Wyman uses the cup as an 'expressive object', turning it into what James Naremore calls a 'signifier of feelings'.⁹ Director William Wellman heightens the pathos of *The Public Enemy's* (1931) finale by crosscutting between shots of Ma Powers (Beryl Mercer) upstairs, shaking out the sheets and making up the bed for her son, Tom (James Cagney), and shots of Mike Powers (Donald Cook) downstairs, waiting for and finally receiving not his brother, but his brother's corpse. The editing underscores the futility of Ma Power's act and symbolically converts the bedsheet into a winding sheet. The contemporary film *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989) exploits the stereotype of the sexually frustrated housewife's proclivity for cleaning by depicting Anne (Andie McDowell), who has problems with sex, shining her kitchen faucet with sharp, whiplike gestures and furiously vacuuming her rugs.

In each of these examples, the representation of a housekeeping task serves to convey the emotional state of a character or helps to foster more generally expressive effects in a scene. Hollywood films usually transform images of domestic labour into vehicles for emotional or symbolic expression. This kind of transformation, which takes the objective social, political and/or economic fact and converts it into an emotional, personal, subjective experience, is a fundamental operation of Hollywood films deriving from their

¹⁰ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 57; Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury: observations on the family melodrama', in *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), pp. 45–7.

¹¹ Columbia Press release synopsis, *Craig's Wife* clippings file, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Archive.

melodramatic lineage.¹⁰ Images of housekeeping present an exemplary case of this phenomenon, because their conversion from productive to expressive labour mirrors the historical process whereby housework has been deprived of any productive economic functions.

The studio press release for Columbia's 1936 version of *Craig's Wife* summarized the film as follows:

Harriet Craig is a selfish, suave, iron minded wife whose only love is her house which she keeps in meticulous show window fashion. It is her warped idea of respectability and security. Her husband must go outside to smoke. In one way or another, she alienates the affection and devotion of the aunt, her servants, her neighbors and niece. Willful, self-centered, lying and suspicious, she puts her husband into crime that her idea of respectability might be maintained. Finally she drives her husband from her side to be left a lonely woman in a cold empty house.¹¹

As the synopsis indicates, the film is explicitly concerned with the role of emotion in marriage. It announces this theme in the opening scene, where we see Harriet visiting her ailing sister Lillian in an out-of-town hospital. Accompanying Harriet is her niece, Ethel, who has abruptly left college and her fiancé to be by her mother's side. In a highly melodramatic establishing shot, Harriet sits some distance from her sister's bed while Ethel kneels beside it, embracing her mother and weeping. As Ethel enthuses about her upcoming commencement and how proud her mother will be of her in her cap and gown, a closeup reveals the sick woman's eyes filling with tears. She is dying; which Ethel perhaps suspects, but Harriet is unaware of. Concerned that Ethel is upsetting her mother, Harriet consults a nurse in the corridor: 'I'm afraid all this emotion will set her back . . . Don't you think she'd make a quicker recovery if she didn't have visitors?' The nurse is in complete agreement: 'Well, Mrs. Craig, if you'll excuse my saying so, visitors always set patients back'. Harriet resolves to leave for home and take her niece with her.

On the train ride back, a conversation reveals that Harriet opposes emotion outside the sickroom as well. Her still considerably-distraught niece reveals that she is engaged and very much in love. Harriet remarks that romantic love is possibly a liability in marriage; a notion Ethel finds appalling. When Ethel remonstrates, 'You married Uncle Walter because you loved him didn't you?', Harriet responds, 'Not with any romantic illusions, dear'. She tells Ethel that she married 'to be independent'. Astutely, if inadvertently, suggesting the precariousness of women's economic position in society, she says 'I had no private fortune, no special

training. The only road to emancipation for me was through the man I married.' For Harriet, romance is absurd and trust of her spouse unnecessary because she discreetly watches over and controls everything her husband does: 'It doesn't bother him if he doesn't know'. She believes that the destiny of a home should be in the woman's hands rather than her husband's. Ethel finds Harriet's marital management scheme 'not quite honest'.

The film then introduces Walter Craig. With his wife out of town, Walter goes to play poker with a friend, Fergus Passmore. He finds Fergus slightly drunk and very depressed about his wife Adelaide, whom he suspects of having an affair. Walter dismisses these suspicions out of hand and suggests to his friend that he get away for a while to clear his head. A cut immediately takes us to a nightclub, where we see Adelaide entering arm-in-arm with another man; a scene which demonstrates Walter's innocence and naivete. The two conversations – Harriet's with Ethel and Walter's with Fergus – introduce Harriet and Walter's very different ideas about emotion and marriage. While Walter advocates 'blind' love and trust, Harriet's attitude is much more calculating and businesslike: a woman must protect herself and secure her home, avoiding the caprice of romantic love. The conflicts in the ensuing narrative all revolve around these two very different approaches to domestic relationships.

Images of housekeeping function in the film both to characterize and criticize Harriet Craig; the narrative sets up an implicit comparison between her skills at managing a house and her abilities as a wife. As a housekeeper, Harriet excels to a fault. An obsessive household manager, she keeps an immaculate home by supervizing her servants closely. Her cool detached personality is expressed by the polished surfaces of her home. Though Dorothy Arzner adheres fairly closely to the dialogue in Kelly's play, she envisions the movie set very differently.¹² Kelly's stage directions call for dark greens and deep browns livened by canary yellows and golds, all against 'dark, highly polished wood', but Arzner stresses Harriet's fastidiousness by decorating the Craig home primarily in white. White rugs cover the floor, white curtains hang in most of the windows. All of the walls in the interior and exterior of the house are beige or white. White Grecian statues sit on pedestals and atop the phone table. The woman of the house matches her home; she is always meticulously groomed and, at one point, she even dons a gown and styles her hair in a manner that resembles the Grecian motif that dominates her decor.¹³ Costume designer Lon Anthony dresses Rosalind Russell in nothing but beige and white gowns for the duration of the film. The house and the wife gleam; immaculate, spotless, without visible blemish.

Yet the film renders Harriet's housekeeping skills as pathological and her marriage as a fraud. When she returns home, she walks

¹² Arzner had a significant amount of control over the production of *Craig's Wife*. Harry Cohn had wanted her to work for Columbia since 1927. Arzner instigated contract negotiations with him in 1936, demanding and receiving producer's status and exemption from Cohn's story conferences on his yacht. Cohn was nevertheless furious with her for hiring Rosalind Russell without his approval and he retaliated by ordering a set, 'Columbia fashion', for the film. Arzner simply hired interior decorator William Haines and the two of them 'sneaked into the studio at night and transformed the set according to Arzner's wishes'. From *Features and Directors: Films by Women* (Toronto: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Center, 1974), pp. 6–7.

¹³ Arzner favoured classical motifs and wanted *Craig's Wife* to have 'the appearance of a modern Greek tragedy'. Ibid. p. 7.

through rooms and surveys them like a military inspector. She sharply upbraids the housekeeper, Mrs Harold, for bringing roses into the living room ('There'll be petals all over'), and she scolds the maid for using the front stairs instead of the back. Frowning, she makes a minute adjustment in the position of an urn on the mantle and runs her hand over the top of a table, checking her two extended fingers carefully for dust. When she finds a phone number on a slip of paper next to the phone, she complains of the clutter and grills the housekeeper as to its significance. Learning that her husband went out the night before and left a number where he could be reached, she goes upstairs and surreptitiously calls the phone company to find out where he was. The phone company will not release the information but relays a record of Harriet's call to the police. This call initiates the film's crisis, for Fergus Passmore has murdered his wife Adelaide and killed himself, and Harriet's call potentially implicates Walter in the crime. She later lies to Walter about it, and his discovery of her deceit instigates the confrontation between them that ends their marriage.

Craig's Wife represents Harriet's obsession with her home and her fanatical housekeeping exclusively through tasks of cleaning and straightening, and her concern with cleanliness extends to social matters as well. She sacks her maid when she finds the maid's boyfriend has stopped in the kitchen for a moment, telling her she will not stand for having tramps in her home. She threatens to leave Walter if he is honest with the police about being at the Passmore residence the night of the murder because she will not have her name 'dirtied by scandal'. What comes in and goes out of her home is of supreme importance to Harriet. While she has no apparent problem with having female relatives or servants live in or visit, she accuses Walter's aunt of turning her home into a public thoroughfare when the aunt invites a widowed neighbour for a visit. We also learn that she has subtly put an end to visits from Walter's friends. In addition to indicating her need to control and monitor her environment, Harriet's obsessive-compulsive cleanliness signifies a repressed and frigid sexuality. When Walter Craig comes rushing into her bedroom to welcome her home, Harriet is perfunctorily affectionate and playful, but rebuffs or interrupts her husband's more ardent advances by pointing out that he's musing the bedspread, wrinkling her clothes, or interfering with her unpacking. She literally sweeps him out of the room.

The visual and dramatic use of cleaning in *Craig's Wife*, juxtaposed with Harriet's lack of emotion and warmth, allows for two related interpretations of its significance within the historical and cultural contexts in which the play and film were produced. The Freudian implications of Harriet's fastidiousness indicate a fear of dirt and contamination related to an abhorrence of sexual contact and intimacy. For audiences in the twenties and thirties, the

¹⁴ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 77–8.

¹⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 60–2.

¹⁶ *Variety*, p. 5.

condemnation of a rigid, controlling, compulsive housewife would resonate with new cultural priorities stressing the importance of sex and romance in marriage. Writing of the attitudinal changes in early twentieth-century US discourses on sex, Beth Bailey asserts ‘a celebratory current began to gain strength by the 1920s. Some of the more accepting attitudes toward sex stemmed from the doctrines of popular Freudianism, which seemed to insist that a freer expression of sexuality was necessary for mental health.’¹⁴ In looking at marriage during the same period, Elaine Tyler May sees a new cultural emphasis on enhancing ‘domesticity with excitement’ in order that the home ‘revitalize’ the man. She finds the new attention to sexuality part of a larger societal shift that increasingly stressed romantic love as the only proper incentive for marriage.¹⁵ *Craig’s Wife* deftly uses Harriet’s exemplary cleanliness to render her character unsympathetic to an audience, to indicate her sexual and emotional inadequacies as a wife, and to imply that she is mentally unhealthy or ‘crazy’ about her house. *Variety*, noting Harriet’s ‘abnormal passion for householding at the expense of every other homely and affectionate relationship between man and wife’, called her a ‘married spinster’.¹⁶

Harriet’s cold, controlling behaviour is explained, if not forgiven, when she tells Walter that her mother went to an early grave, left penniless and broken hearted by an unfaithful, improvident husband whom she loved dearly. This anecdote attempts to render Harriet’s values and behaviour intelligible within the moral universe assumed by the film. Harriet behaves the way she does because she has been emotionally damaged. Yet prior to this revelation from Harriet’s past, Arzner makes her seem genuinely confused by or oblivious to the values held by other characters. When she and Walter confront one another, she tells him quite unabashedly that he has got his ‘share of the bargain’ in their marriage. Mortified, he replies that he never considered marriage a bargain and didn’t know she did. Harriet says ‘You didn’t expect me to go into something as important as marriage with my eyes shut, did you?’ While the prevailing ethos of the film indicates that a rational, calculating approach to marriage is a dishonest approach, at an earlier moment in US history, Harriet’s overriding sin of making a dispassionate decision about her marriage partner would have been difficult for an audience to grasp as evil or immoral.

Harriet’s cleaning can be viewed from another perspective that depersonalizes or politicizes the conflicts I have been describing. Mary Douglas offers an interpretive model that elucidates some of the cultural and symbolic implications of cleaning. Her book *Purity and Danger* investigates notions of pollution, contamination, and dirt as they function in modern as well as primitive societies. She

argues that the ritual, productive, symbolic aspects of pollution taboos are obscured in our culture by a scientifically authorized discourse of hygiene and health:

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 7.

Specifically referring to housewives, Douglas observes that the activities of 'scrubbing and cleaning' are not performed primarily 'to avoid disease'. Rather, the housewife, in performing these tasks, is 'separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home' she is creating from 'a material house'.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Cleaning is a productive process in Douglas's view, a fact that can be discerned from the significance of dirt: 'Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.'¹⁹ These ideas afford another, more socially oriented interpretation of Harriet's cleaning and her regulatory policies concerning who enters her home and who does not, and what behaviours are permitted of those allowed entry. If cleaning is a mode of instituting system and order, then Harriet's fastidiousness can be seen not only as an expression of sexual frigidity, but also as the means by which she establishes the boundaries and rules of her domain. The system she institutes is based on strict discriminations between what should remain outside her house, what is dirty or dangerous (flowers or organic material, scandal or social dirt, men – excepting her husband – and women who are not related to her) and what she allows in. Her cleaning and her notions of dirt articulate a domestic sphere that is almost exclusively female and familial; its extremity indicates the extremity of her social aspirations: to be left to herself, to have her own world. Harriet's character obtains her desire, as in the end she is in possession of her home. But the moral framework of the film depicts her triumph as hollow, defusing the social and political import of her material independence by presenting its attainment in the context of emotional loneliness and suffering. While Harriet's view of domesticity contains the remnants of a different social milieu than that assumed by the film, the narrative uses her character to personalize and condemn this alternative point of view. This condemnation hinges on Harriet's inability to be emotional.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Harriet Craig's abilities to keep or manage a house do not compare in importance to her moral responsibility to sincerely love her husband, relatives, neighbours and servants, and to maintain a

healthy emotional environment in her home. The film uses images of a well-kept house, a paragon of cleanliness and meticulous order, to suggest the cold, barren sterility of Harriet and her home; a home compared in the narrative to a hospital and a morgue. The message of the film is that even though Harriet is a superlative housekeeper, she is no homemaker. Her belief that the destiny of a home should be in a woman's hands recalls the ideology of separate spheres, but the film condemns this belief by representing her character as territorial, selfish, dishonest and presumptuous. Yet stripped of these moralistic trappings, the character transgresses because she regards her home as a workplace and her marriage as a contract or bargain. Thus, in certain respects, she embodies the values and attitudes of a previous social era which has been successfully superseded by a more modern, more expressive vision of the home and domesticity. Harriet's view of domesticity, like her Grecian decor, is antiquated, a thing of the past.

Craig's Wife tells the story of what happens to the home and its keeper in consumer culture. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the increased emphasis on consumption coincided with, and in some ways participated in, the shift noted above in the character of marriage and the home. 'Into the twentieth century, marriage remained a life goal and domesticity a center of women's existence, but ideals focused more on man than God.' By then, as historian Phyllis Palmer observes, 'women were encouraged to be beautiful (and youthful), sexually alive (but not immodest), and intelligently charming (but not overly intellectual)'. While the nineteenth-century housewife lived in and managed 'a female world' that operated as a counterpart to her husband's, 'the modern woman organized her life much more around men and heterosexual relations'.²⁰ In the twenties, the phrase 'companionate marriage' came into being and was used to describe marriages sustained not by the rigid constraints of moral social codes or religious dictates, but by the more personal bonds of 'mutual affection, sexual attraction'. Couples married and, more importantly, stayed together for love. 'The goal of marriage was no longer financial security or a nice home but emotional and sexual fulfilment and compatibility'.²¹

Among other things, public discourse and speculation on the properties of a good wife signified the widespread acceptance of the ideal of the 'companionate marriage'. The twenties saw a dramatic inflation of public interest in women's emotional role in the home at the same time that the importance ascribed to their actual labour waned. 'Recognizing that the home was no longer a center of production, experts argued that it was uniquely suited to foster emotional health in an industrial society The housewife thus became the party in charge of psychological adjustment'.²² Magazine articles and advertising focused on the emotional components of the woman's role as mother and wife. Glenna Matthews has remarked

20 Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 6-7.

21 Stephen Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 115.

22 Glenna Matthews, 'Just a Housewife': *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 181-2.

²³ Ibid., p. 183.

²⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, 'From salvation to self-realization: advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880-1930', in *The Culture of Consumption* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 4-6.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

²⁷ Susan Stasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1882), p. 253.

²⁸ Lears, *The Culture of Consumption*, pp. 21-2.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 22-7.

that the twenties demonstrated 'an ever-increasing self-consciousness about the home's expressive function'.²³ In cultural representations, the housewife's responsibilities shifted from tangible domestic chores to intangible emotional tasks. Her job was now represented in terms of her ability to love and nurture her husband and family.

Advertising, the rhetorical voice of consumer culture, played a large part in promoting and publicizing the emotional role of the wife, home, and private life. The message advertisers sold reflected changes in the notions of the individual and the self stemming from profound economic changes. T.J. Jackson Lears argues that the social transformations of the nineteenth century resulted in a crisis of the self endemic to the early twentieth century. This crisis stemmed from the secularization of Protestantism, from urbanization, and from technological development, all of which led to a pervasive sense of unreality among the US bourgeois.²⁴ The new bureaucracies that dominated business exacerbated this 'decline of autonomous selfhood' because 'an interdependent and increasingly corporate economy circumscribed autonomous will and choice'.²⁵ As traditional institutions and social structures (religion, community) lost their ability to apprehend the position of the self in the modern world, emphasis on the authenticity of the individual's private life and on self-realization and fulfilment arose. A 'therapeutic ethos' articulated private life as a healthy escape from a completely rationalized and oppressive workplace by focusing on the importance of intense personal and emotional experiences.²⁶

Lears asserts that advertisers quickly assimilated and perpetuated this cultural discourse and that it shaped their new, nonrational advertising strategies. Historian Susan Stasser concurs. Whereas advertisements were initially designed to inform consumers about products, in the early decades of the twentieth century, they were increasingly intended to solicit and manipulate the consumer's desires and fears.²⁷ Lears notes that this shift in tactics reflected a change in the advertiser's perception of the public. They came to view or, better, to interpellate their audiences not as 'strong-willed, rational beings, but as impulsive and susceptible to suggestion'. Advertisements offered audiences 'not information but feeling'.²⁸ While Lears points out that irrational, emotional appeals were used to advertise products for everyone, he also notes that women's cultural position let them in for a substantial share of emotional manipulation. Advertisers invoked the private sphere and the quality of private life more and more in order 'to promise the maintenance of domestic harmony through intelligent consumption'. They went so far as to create and promote maternal or conjugal guilt by threatening dire consequences to the family of the housewife who did not use a particular product.²⁹ The 'therapeutic ethos' used by advertisers articulated private life and specifically housekeeping tasks in terms of *emotional* rewards and threats, thereby suggesting to the

housewife that her choice of crackers or soap was a measure of her love and concern for her family.

Through the example of advertising, Lears illustrates the cultural character of the therapeutic ethos and suggests one means by which it spread. He details how the social and economic changes implicit in the consumer revolution instigated the development of a secular morality predicated on concerns about psychic, emotional, and physical health and the achievement of personal fulfilment. *Craig's Wife* acts out the effects of this morality on cultural conceptions of the housewife.

Harriet Craig is a descendent of the Victorian 'angel in the house', the protector of a domain articulated as separate and aloof from an outside world which threatens it. She herself does not do housework; she manages the home, its atmosphere, and those that work within it. However, time has robbed the angel of her spiritual and material functions and, as an upper-class housewife, she has little real work to do. Borrowing an image from the past, the film manages a thinly-veiled class critique through the depiction of Harriet's inordinate privilege and her haughty attitude toward those subordinate to her. The film's screenwriter sharpens the critique and gives it a very timely resonance in one of the changes she makes to the plot of Kelly's play.³⁰ In Kelly's version, Harriet fires her maid because she leaves raffle tickets on the mantle. In the film, Harriet fires the maid because her boyfriend visits the kitchen and says hello. Harriet proclaims that she 'can't have every *tramp* that comes along in her kitchen'. The allusion to the Depression is unmistakable. In populist America in the thirties, Harriet's affluence and her attitude would be particularly vulnerable to criticism; thus Harriet's autonomy, her belief that a home is a woman's place, is wedded to a selfish isolationism and a sense of class privilege, when that privilege would be viewed as especially offensive and obnoxious. (Of course, the critique is very limited in scope. Harriet is evil because of her manner, not because of her money; by contrast, Walter Craig is represented as the soul of generosity and benevolence.)

Though a very problematic example of the form, *Craig's Wife* adheres to certain obvious conventions of melodrama. It tells a tale whose conflict and resolution involve the struggle, vindication, and recognition of a moral principle. Peter Brooks asserts that this revelation of the 'moral occult' is especially important to the melodramatic form because such narratives are 'about virtue made visible and acknowledged'.³¹ Yet *Craig's Wife* makes visible and celebrates something more often associated with melodramatic expression than with specifically moral or ethical issues. The measure by which all the characters in *Craig's Wife* are judged

³⁰ In Julia Lesage's work on *Craig's Wife*, she observes that Arzner changes Kelly's play by enhancing the roles of the secondary women characters. See 'The hegemonic female fantasy in *An Unmarried Woman* and *Craig's Wife*', *Film Reader*, no. 5 (1982), p. 91. Judith Mayne considers the emphasis on female characters in her discussion of lesbian inflections in Arzner's films. Mayne, *Female Authorship Reconsidered*, p. 113.

³¹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 27.

involves their ability to feel emotions and to care about others and, by this measure, only Harriet fails. The extent to which the film supports emotion or sentiment as a value regardless of the moral actions of individual characters emerges in its comparative assessment of Adelaide and Harriet. Despite her adultery and the fact that she 'drives' her husband to murder her and kill himself, Adelaide holds a more secure moral position in the film than does Harriet. Walter tells Harriet reprovingly, 'There was one thing about Adelaide. She wrecked herself and Fergus because she loved somebody.'

Cast in a melodramatic narrative, the pragmatic, contractually-based notion of marriage and domesticity represented through Harriet's character is immoral and dishonest: Harriet plays the villain of the piece, yet she is not a typical villain by any means, nor is *Craig's Wife* a typical melodrama. Harriet neither kills nor harms anyone, and if she is a harsh employer, she still pays her servants 'better than anyone in town'. The plot structure of the film is also unique in that typically-melodramatic events and situations – the Passmore murder/suicide, the victimization of Harriet's mother – occur offscreen and figure only marginally in the comparatively undramatic and benign story of the Craig marriage. The most dramatic moment in their narrative occurs when Harriet's husband Walter smashes a vase, scattering shards everywhere, or when he dirties an ashtray. The marital struggles in *Craig's Wife* are waged not over adultery or betrayal, but at the level of propriety, order, and cleanliness. Inverting the proclivity of melodramatic sets to express the inexpressible through pronounced excess in the mise-en-scene, the Craig home is excessively sparse, austere, rigid and bland: it looks like a museum. Love, passion, and devotion, the film suggests, are both messy and moral. To be clean and untouchable is to be sick or dead.

Craig's Wife, in indicting its heroine for not loving, feeling or suffering, indicts her for not partaking of a melodramatic sensibility. Harriet's character views her private life in social, economic, or public terms, considering her marriage and housekeeping pragmatically, in relation to her financial situation and her lack of any other employment opportunities. In the end she errs not because of her actions – which might be more adequately critiqued in the character of a comic shrew – but because she seems incapable of 'unpremeditated feeling'. While, as Christine Gledhill observes, melodrama has always stressed 'unpremeditated feeling as an index of moral status and social value',³² in *Craig's Wife* the index is disassociated from any substantive moral questions and becomes a social value in and of itself. Thomas Elsaesser remarks that melodrama, whether employed to conservative or subversive political ends, always tends to interiorize and personalize 'what are primarily ideological conflicts'.³³ He finds this tendency endemic to

³² Christine Gledhill, 'The melodramatic field: an investigation', in *Home is Where the Heart Is* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), p. 24.

³³ Elsaesser, 'Tales of sound and fury', p. 46.

popular culture's approach to social problems. What is personalized and demonized in Harriet Craig is her inability to capitulate to this process. Thus *Craig's Wife* illustrates the extent to which the melodramatic imagination and, by inference, popular culture, are complicit with an exclusively expressive view of the home, housekeeping, and women.

Industrial and consumer revolutions restructure social geography such that the home becomes the primary, private context in opposition to the public market. The cultural sensibilities described by Brooks' notion of the melodramatic imagination and by Lears' idea of the therapeutic ethos derive from this opposition, promoting a moralistic worldview that can only see the family, housewives and the home in privative, emotional terms. Such sensibilities highlight the primacy of personal experience and the private individual, the everyday and the emotional, positioning these aspects of life as an antidote, either moral or therapeutic, for the vapidty and amorality of the workplace. Lears connects the therapeutic ethos to the rise of the culture of consumption, while Elsaesser finds melodrama to be a pervasive mode in popular-culture texts. The similarities in their work point to the close conceptual and dramatic affinities that persist between the commodity rhetoric of the marketplace and culture-industry narratives. In the purview of both, housekeeping becomes – must become – a moral and emotional, rather than a practical issue. Any other perspective of domesticity is only comprehensible as a moral transgression and/or as a form of mental or emotional sickness.

Both generically and as a specific text, *Craig's Wife* participates in changing cultural discourses concerning marriage, sex and romance by perpetuating an ethos wherein emotion, especially for women, has assumed moral proportions and romantic love has become the only honest incentive for marriage.

Blood on the borders – *Near Dark* and *Blue Steel*

ANNA POWELL

1 Despite the 'death of the author', autism has a particular resonance within feminism.

Kathryn Bigelow, one of the few successful women directors in Hollywood, has produced a sufficiently substantial body of work to have now reached auteur status.¹ Identifiable Bigelow motifs and narrative patterns have emerged through several films. She uses stunning and expressionistic visuals, rapid narrative pacing, thrilling and visceral scenes of eroticized violence and physical action. Narrative closure tends to be withheld by the use of 'false' and open, anticlimactic endings. Intertextuality is frequent – particularly in *Near Dark*, with its evocation of the Western, the countercultural road movie and the gothic horror. Her more sympathetic characters are sexually attractive young rebels, chiefly male, and often members of subcultural groups such as bikers and surfers. Transgression of the law is a frequent narrative device and the site of much erotic and violent charge.

As a rare woman director of prominence and commercial success, Bigelow's work has been much written about by feminist critics and reviewers, and much watched by female audience members. Her use of rock music soundtracks, pretty young actors, outlaw groups, 'ultraviolence' and sexual 'deviance', along with streetwise dialogue and countercultural settings, has made her work popular among young audiences. In interviews, Bigelow has tended to take up an antiessentialist stance in response to accusations that she prefers 'masculine' subject matter: 'I think that this notion that there's a woman's aesthetic, a woman's eye, is really debilitating. It ghettoises women.'² She has shown a predilection for thrillers, crime and horror, and road movies, with much emphasis on fighting, shooting and stabbing.

2 Katherine Bigelow, interview in *The Guardian*, 8 January 1988.

Nevertheless, in both *Near Dark* (1987) and *Blue Steel* (1990) women characters have prominent roles which include elements of gender stereotype reversal, and denials of existing power relations. They are sexually active, confident and unafraid in demanding situations and take the lead in seduction and courtship. The heroines of both films are physically strong, prefer 'masculine' attire, and behave transgressively, when necessary, to protect themselves or others. Both are single, and not biological mothers, although some of their attitudes and actions could be described as maternal. Megan, in *Blue Steel*, is undoubtedly the hero of the narrative, and the audience's main point of identification and sympathy. Mae, in *Near Dark*, is a sexy, strong, active vampire of much greater interest to the audience than the pretty, conventional Caleb. She walks alone at night, autonomous and confident of her superior strength. In her relationship with Caleb, traditional gendered power relations are reversed, apart from his demands for feeding and mothering, which she resents and soon rejects.

Both films engage in testing or reworking family structures which differ from the abstract ideal of the nuclear family. Horror elements are used to threaten this symbolic construct but, in addition, the manifestations of conformity to the ideal are revealed as severely lacking, or even horrific in themselves. As Vivian Sobchack has suggested in her essay on family horror, a major function of the genre is to attack and challenge the validity of the ideal.

The Family and its members are seen as subject to the frightening, but potentially liberating, semiotic processes of selection and combination – and their order, meaning and power are perceived as open to transformation, dissolution and redefinition.³

However, in many horror films, the basic family structure is reinforced, or remains unchanged, after the monster or abject elements have been forcibly expelled. The exploding of the family unit initiated by the monstrous is only a temporary dissolution. After the challenge has been worked through, recombination takes place, and the symbolic use of the patriarchal family as one of the mainstays of social order is retained. The traditional closure of the horror genre requires that the forces of order reassemble in a stronger form after the forces of chaos and disruption have been exorcized and abjection has been identified and destroyed. Sobchack has characterized this typical closure as reactionary:

Engaging in an urgent and dynamic exchange, whose goal is ultimately conservative, horror attempts to narratively contain, work out, and in some fashion re-solve the contemporary weakening of patriarchal authority and the glaring contradictions

3 Vivian Sobchack, 'Bringing it all back home: family, economy and generic exchange', in Gregory A. Waller (ed.), *American Horrors* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 178.

that exist between the mythology of family relations and their actual social practice.⁴

It is questionable as to how far this reactionary reinstatement of the family ideal takes place in the two Bigelow texts. *Near Dark*'s conventional romantic ending with Mae's rejection of vampirism after her 'family' has been destroyed, and her potential to be a nice little wife for Caleb, lacks conviction, and forms a pale afterthought to the visceral traumas of the burning vampires. Her 'conversion' is dubious given that we have seen her function as an active, desiring blood-drinker through the narrative, and we recall the deceptively frail and ethereal figure of the opening sequences. It is also doubtful whether Caleb's initiation into the transgressive pleasures of the outlaw life will fit him for his farm-boy duties again, and he is still wearing the spur awarded to him by his blood brother Severen.

The searing violence and terror of the showdown between Megan and Eugene in the finale of *Blue Steel* ends in anticlimax as our hero is collected and taken up into Police ranks as an honorary 'good fella'. It is ironic that the only way she could gain acceptance was by exterminating one of the hydra-heads of the patriarchy, the corrupt capitalist, whilst being absorbed into the system of another. Her parents remain shackled together in domestic horror after she has failed radically to break their bondage by arresting her brutal father. This family unit has already clearly been revealed to us as fundamentally unsound, and its continuance leaves the audience disappointed – Eugene is dead but Megan's family remains a source of horror and social disease.

I will now delineate the key incidents in each film which engage with family horror discourses, and indicate how each text writes gender and family.

At the start of *Near Dark*, we are apparently offered the narrative of a sexual fling between a nubile local boy and an enigmatic drifter he picks up on a hot night in a one-horse town. Family discourses soon intervene, however, and retain their prominence throughout the film. Holding off the anticipated embrace, Mae demands to be driven back home like a dutiful daughter concerned not to keep her parents waiting up for her. Indeed, when she fails to come back at the expected hour, her anxious family drive out to pick her up. By now Caleb has been vamped, making him vulnerable to kidnap by his new girlfriend's demonic family who snatch him up into their camper. His symbolic cowboy hat rolls uselessly in the dust as his 'good' family impotently pursues the outlaw's van.

His new 'bad' family reluctantly agrees to foster Caleb for a week's trial run, even though he is already now a blood relative due to the bite from Mae, his lover/adoptive sister. His condescending distaste at their scruffy and menacing appearance ('Who the Hell are you people?') is ironic coming from a now dirty, sweaty and

bloodstained Caleb who, lacking self-knowledge, fails to accept that he has already chosen to open the lid of his dark side. His reckless desire for Mae has activated his 'bad boy' repressed persona. Nevertheless he continues to act as though nothing has changed and plays the dutiful son, echoing Mae's earlier dutiful daughter, not wanting to worry his pop: 'I like you, I really do, but I gotta get home', he apologizes to his new girlfriend and shows that he would still like to be Daddy's good boy above all.

Like Mina Harker, when Jonathan overstays at Castle Dracula, Loy and Sarah are troubled by bad dreams, and begin their own search for their recalcitrant son and brother after the law fails them and refuses help. Out in the Badlands, families have to act as a law unto themselves to maintain their unity independent of the State – many echoes of Westerns, such as *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) are made here. Both generic sources have a long tradition of romanticizing the family.

Whilst the Coltons continue their search, the bad family (echoes of the Clantons from the Western) are ridiculing their new, unwanted son. The males, Jesse, Severen and Homer are especially reluctant to accept Caleb as a member of their clan. Homer complains that 'he ain't one of us'. They set up initiation tests for membership of their kin, and demand that Caleb prove his vampiric virility as his siblings' equal. At this stage in the narrative, the erotic relations between Caleb and Mae recede, and the emphasis shifts to Caleb earning his spurs. Jesse is a stern, punishing father, and Severen a violent, bullying older brother. Unlike the contemporary Colton family of single parent/new man Loy and his two children, the vampires form a more archaic, extended family or clan group. Severen would be a potential rival to Caleb as Jesse's heir, but Jesse is a fearsomely eternal and permanent father whom no son will ever succeed.

The wholesome normality of the Coltons is emphasized during the final scenes in the ranch house where they sit quietly in a circle round the table enjoying their meal (of acceptable human food). Soon after this scene the defiant vampire clan will perish violently by fire. Only Mae survives this expulsion of the abject, and in the 'afterword' it is suggested that she, like Caleb earlier, will be adopted by a new family, perhaps as a mother-substitute and begetter of a new generation, if her transfusion succeeds and fills her with good blood to continue the Colton's patriarchal line. Doubtless Loy will be hoping to teach his new daughter good family norms, unlike Jesse's corruption of Caleb as adopted son.

In *Blue Steel*, Megan's family are much less prominent in terms of narrative appearance and screen time. Disappointed in her parents, Megan appears to be looking for a new, substitute family in the Police, and a new father in Eugene. Several scenes emphasize her isolation and loneliness as a woman lacking strong family ties, such

as the sequences in her flat or walking around her neighbourhood streets with a bag of food for a solitary meal. An early scene indicates Megan's need for a family role – at the graduation ceremony she poses for 'family' photos hugging her friend Tracey and holding Tracey's child, acting a traditional 'father' or 'uncle' role.

Our first image of Megan's father, Frank, is deliberately misleading. It presents him as a benign but misunderstood figure who has perhaps been a little rebellious in his youth hence his mistrust of the Police. He is coded as a kindly patriarch with grey hair and spectacles, bewildered at his awkward daughter's refusal of her traditional role of staying at home until marriage and helping her mother to tend to his needs. The visual clues we are given position us in sympathetic commiseration with his resentful 'I've got a goddam cop for a daughter' at the tense family meal table. Shirley's plea to Frank and Megan 'Don't start!' cues the presence of an old history of family friction between daughter and father, but at this early stage in the narrative we have insufficient information to assume anything more sinister than longstanding arguments between a grumbling father and a rebellious daughter, set off by certain contentious topics. The special nature of the occasion – Megan's acceptance into a new job – makes them shelve the argument and continue in conventional family roles for the remainder of the meal.

Shortly after this meal scene, Shirley calls into Megan's station to visit her – perhaps as a veiled plea for help – but consciously she denies that Frank has been hitting her. Megan's sceptical response alerts the viewer to domestic violence as a longstanding occurrence. The unfolding of the true narrative of Megan's family history, previously suppressed, is concurrent with her developing relationship with Eugene.

There is a noticeable edit made between the shot of Eugene admiring his gun-as-penis in the mirror, chuckling in childish narcissism, and a shot of Tracey's three-year-old son on his bike, which implies the infantilism of Eugene's psychic disturbance, and his lack of moral responsibility.

Tracey functions as an image of 'normal' femininity to which Megan secretly aspires. Such a role is now barred to Megan whilst she is compelled to work through her own family drama using a more masculine persona as both shield and weapon. Tracey's cosy family situation offers an image of what Megan's might have been had she had a less fractured family background, although she rejects the advances of the dull and conventional Howard in favour of the more glamorous and dangerous Eugene. Howard is embarrassed by Megan's job and regards it with disapproval as an unsuitable job for a 'beautiful' woman, whereas Eugene feeds her narcissism in the early stages of their relationship by his fascination with her police role.

Tracey's murder destroys Megan's sole ideal of normal family life. Eugene has forcibly cut her off from female friendship and has tried to implicate her as his partner in homicidal practices. In a state of deep trauma, she returns for comfort and emotional support to the family home which instead offers only brutality and suppression of women.

Frank and Eugene become increasingly elided as Megan successfully grapples with and arrests her father, acting out the capture and punishment of Eugene who has again evaded imprisonment. When Frank becomes self-pitying and pathetic instead of aggressive, and Megan softens to him and takes him home, so Eugene appears, smiling in easy confidence in the parental living room. He has already charmed his way into Shirley's sympathies, perhaps suggesting her repetition compulsion for the wrong type of man. Megan's freeing of her father appears to have empowered the monstrous Eugene, conflating her biological father and the representative of the capitalist patriarchy. By this time, however, she has disowned her father, and the fascination in which Eugene held her has changed to revulsion and fear.

The situations I have outlined above, and their textual expression, are richly suggestive when opened up by psychoanalytic approaches. The most relevant scenarios for critiquing *Near Dark* are Freud and Klein's work on the Oedipus complex and maternal object relations, particularly oral gratifications. Caleb, now motherless, regresses to infancy in his relations with Mae. This reverses the apparent power relations between them when he picks her up. On their first meeting, Mae appears ethereal and frail. Her blonde delicacy is offset by her clothes, 'masculine' denim jeans and cut-off jacket, short hair and lack of makeup. Caleb appears in confident cowboy machismo among friends in his own local town. He tries to impress Mae with his horse, and his antics with the lasso with which he tries to capture and dominate her by 'breaking her in'. His attempt to bind her is turned against him as she takes control and draws him towards her with the rope: 'You're pretty strong', he tells her in amazement. 'Yeah, stronger than you', she replies, reversing his expectations.

Later, in the pickup truck, he attempts to regain dominance by hiding the key, dropping it down his shirt front as a sexual tease. Rejecting this childish flirtation, Mae again takes the lead, kisses him, and effects his vampiric sexual initiation into orality. The sequence is shot in soft focus, bathed in blue light, and slightly slow motion, emphasizing the entrance into the *unheimlich* vampire condition. Mae is positioned higher in the frame, leaning down over Caleb as a more experienced seducer as she chooses her moment for the bite. Satisfied, she draws back, her mouth smeared with his blood, and he gives an orgasmic gasp of surprise, combining pain and pleasure.

5 Melanie Klein, 'Notes on some schizoid mechanisms', in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works – 1946–1963* (London: Virago, 1990), p. 8.

6 Ibid.

7 Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 282.

8 Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality* (London: Pelican, 1977), p. 384.

In this scene, the embodiment of oral sadism in the vampire phantasy is shown, in Klein's words, as 'The predominantly oral impulse to suck dry, bite up, scoop up, and rob the mother's body of its good contents'.⁵ According to her schema, this is combined with anal and urethral impulses in order to gain control of the 'mother'. This involves the expulsion of dangerous substances from the self into the 'mother'. These excrements and bad parts of the self are meant not only to injure but also to control and to take possession of the object.⁶

The vampire's bite can serve two purposes. It can simply be a method of feeding, which frequently involves the death of the drained victim; but it can also be a means of reproduction, involving the exchange of blood, transforming the victim into a vampire and giving the possibility of eternal life as a member of the Undead. Both participants in this latter exchange, as with Mae and Caleb, can be viewed as 'mothers' and 'children'. This potential ignores gendered specificity, and dissolves subjectivity in its unchecked exchange and mingling, which opens the boundaries of the self to admit the Other. A striking description of this vampiric sharing appears in Stoker's *Dracula*, when the Count compels Mina to drink blood from his breast: 'his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast.'⁷

The new Otherness of Caleb is signalled on his body as his flesh begins to smoulder when hit by the rays of the rising sun. This symbolically evokes both Christian damnation – burning in Hell – and pagan dualism (as constructed by Nietzsche) between the eternally opposed forces of Apollo and Dionysus.

Joining the vampire family involves Caleb in a process of rebirth and a return of his infantile status as the baby of the family. He appears to be acting out an unresolved Oedipal relation with his mother using Mae as a substitute and her bleeding wrist as a surrogate breast. Caleb resists weaning for an excessively long period, so Mae is forced to kill for him and then feed him from her own body as he clings to his second infancy. Freud outlined the stages of passivity and activity in the mother/child dyad:

The first sexual and sexually coloured experiences which a child has in relation to its mother are naturally of a passive character. It is suckled, fed, cleaned and dressed by her, and taught to perform all its functions. A part of its libido goes on clinging to these experiences and enjoys the satisfactions bound up with them; but another part strives to turn them into activity. In the first place, being suckled at the breast gives place to active sucking.⁸

Eventually, Caleb learns active aggression against external objects

without total reliance on Mae's 'milk': the blood she has pre-digested for him.

Christopher Craft, in his essay 'Kiss me with those red lips' has characterized the ambiguities which crowd around the figure of the vampiric mouth, which 'equivocates, giving the lie to the easy separation of the masculine and feminine. Lured at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone.'⁹

The vampire mouth serves to displace sexual activity from phallic penetration to oral contacts with erogenous areas in other parts of the body, particularly the neck and chest. Caleb, hugging Mae's thighs as he kneels before her, sucks at her wrist the wound she has made for him with her own teeth. This scene, with the pumping oil wells in the background (*à la Written on the Wind* [Douglas Sirk, 1956]) is overtly erotic, and displaces cunnilingus, as Craft has suggested: 'The image of red and voluptuous lips, with their slow trickle of blood, has, of course, always harboured this potential'.¹⁰ Several taboos converge here: sexual activity during menstruation, Oedipal desires for the mother, and willing submission to the *vagina dentata*. At the end of this polymorphously-perverse sequence, Mae cries out in pain and thrusts Caleb's greedy mouth away. His gleeful regression and indulgence of oral sadistic impulses has almost tilted over into matricide.

A secondary concern to the mother, and her structuring absence in this narrative, is the paternal relation. Caleb's two, alternative fathers provide role models for the overt and repressed, conventional and rebellious aspects of his behaviour. Loy, Caleb's biological father, is characterized as a 'new man' with the emphasis on his 'feminine' aspects – healing, caring and domesticity. He is seen doctoring sheep, working to preserve healthy life, and is affectionate and gentle to his children and devoted to their welfare.

Loy has reared Caleb as his heir to the ranch, and instilled in him wholesome country (and Western!) values. Under the sadistic and threatening tutelage of Jesse, the Civil War veteran, and his tough consort, Diamondback, Caleb is given access to a deviant, outlaw lifestyle beyond social norms. Instead of being the son of a benign and respected patriarch embodying American ideals of independence, self-help and peaceful domesticity, Caleb joins the outsiders. Under the Bad Father's rule, Caleb is rejected by 'straight' society and arouses reactions of distaste or pity. For example, the policeman gives him the extra three dollars needed for his busfare assuming that he is a repentant wastrel or junkie: 'Get home – be a good boy'. Caleb's problems, however, result from having been too good for too long. His membership of Jesse's family enables his repressed aggression and sexuality to be released.

During the roadhouse massacre, when Severen goads Caleb into attacking the redneck, he stands back amazed at the results of his

⁹ Christopher Craft, 'Kiss me with those red lips', *Representations*, vol. 8 (1984), p. 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Caleb's new teachers, Jesse and Diamondback (Lance Henriksen and Jenette Goldstein) in *Near Dark*. Courtesy: Entertainment Film Distributors / BFI Stills.



11 Ibid.

unleashed impulses ('Did I do that?') and unwilling to accept responsibility for his own destructive urges. Under Jesse's paternity all is permitted except the practice of those virtues instilled by Loy, his antithesis. Craft has identified this 'theme of alternate paternities' and the 'competition between antithetical fathers'¹¹ in *Dracula*.

Like the original good father, Van Helsing, Loy uses transfusion to normalize his errant son. The phallic, penetrative symbolism of the transfusion needles is clear. Referring to Van Helsing's oxymoronic description of his medical implements as 'the ghastly paraphernalia of our beneficial trade', Craft implies the relationship between paternalism and violence. Loy first drains Caleb's vampiric blood, then replaces it by his own paternal fluid. Filial submission is apparently ensured when Caleb is reunited with a penitent Mae who will also submit to Loy's paternal authority and be reblooded. Her old family has been annihilated, so she agrees to adoption. Caleb now has everything he needs to fulfil his filial duties to Loy.

Although there is common ground in the scenarios applicable to both films, notably the Oedipal relations and the death drive, certain theories are more relevant to a reading of *Blue Steel* than to *Near Dark*. Of particular use here are concepts of the phallic woman, the flight from femininity and problematic mother/daughter relations. Karen Horney's study, 'The flight from womanhood – the masculinity complex in women' forms a useful basic resource with which to approach Megan Turner. Horney traces the 'masculinity complex' back to the over-repression of Oedipal desires by the girl child, who 'not only renounce[s] the father as a sexual object but

¹² Karen Horney, 'The flight from womanhood' (1926), in Jean B. Miller (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Women* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 14.

¹³ Clara Thompson, 'Penis envy in women' (1943), in Miller, *Psychoanalysis and Women*, p. 55.

¹⁴ Ruth Moulton, 'A revaluation of the concept of penis envy (1970), in Horney, *Psychoanalysis and Women*, p. 244.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

simultaneously recoil[s] from the feminine role altogether'.¹² If the girl adopts a phallic role, she disavows her vaginal vulnerability to the dreaded/desired penetration by the father.

Clara Thomson's essay 'Penis envy in women' could be usefully applied to Megan's fetishistic usage of guns as a talisman against her father's brutality: 'She believes the man wishes to dominate or destroy her. She wishes to be in a position to do similar things to him. In other words, the penis is to her a sword for conquering and destruction. She feels cheated that she has not a similar sword for the same purpose'.¹³

A further source of the 'masculinity complex' is a weak and negative mother figure who does not project an appealing role model for the young girl. As her mother is disempowered, the daughter determines not to identify with her as she grows up, but prefers to emulate the father's strength and power. If she works at developing phallic attributes, then she will avoid becoming like her mother, according to Ruth Moulton. 'If the girl's mother is ineffectual as a woman, resents the female role, and gets only contempt from her husband, the growing girl has no positive model to identify with or learn from'.¹⁴ Moulton endorses this view by her clinical practice with 'phallic women' patients. Again, she traces their malaise to negative mother figures. 'The patients blocked from access to feminine pride and competence, fled from womanhood as undesirable and dangerous, feeling that the male role would be safer and easier'.¹⁵

These theories tend to remain rooted in essentialist views of what is 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour, rather than considering the possibility, also suggested by Freud, of multiple and shifting gender roles within one individual, of an innate bisexuality which is conditioned out in gender socialization processes. Even so, they seem to 'fit' certain aspects of *Blue Steel* very effectively. The opening credits of the film fetishize the gun. We first see Megan using her phallus substitute to probe corridors in the training exercise. She fails to use the gun successfully here, because after 'shooting' the man who appears to be attacking the woman, the 'victim' turns, unexpectedly, against the cop and 'shoots' her. This situation immediately implies that Megan wants to champion women against male aggression by using its own, phallic tool.

The film's title also seems to function metaphorically as a quality of Megan as the hero. Blue is the 'masculine' colour, associated with coldness and Megan has blue eyes. Steel is a smooth, sleek metal associated with strength and resilience, with swords, knives and guns. Her slim, sleek body is clad in blue uniform as a sign of membership of a mainly male organisation whose ideal attributes might be symbolized by the guns they carry and use. 'Blue Steel' is also US slang for an erection.

The eroticization of the Smith and Wesson, made almost tactile in

extreme, textured closeups, presents this phallic symbol as an object of desire. Megan's adoption of the phallus is suggested by her buckling on the leather holster which contains it, juxtaposed with a shot of her naked torso. 'Masculine' and 'feminine' combine as she buttons up her police shirt over her lacy white bra. Much fetishistic play is made with her uniform and of the concealment of her female body beneath trousers and shirt, tie and cap, and hard, shiny leather shoes. As her hands are hidden by gloves, only her face remains as a token of her gender identity, and Jamie Lee Curtis's facial features are themselves androgynous. Her narcissistic mirror gaze reveals her enjoyment of this masquerade. By adopting both the look and the role, she has subsumed herself within a large, powerful organization, whose main function is to uphold the patriarchal power structure. She has chosen the ultimate in phallic posturing.

Megan has evidently overinvested in and idealized the Police. We see her in the passing-out ceremony repeating the ritualistic vows with zeal among the massed, uniformed recruits. Beneath her chivalric enthusiasm, however, it is suggested that a darker sadistic urge may lie. In banter with her fellow officer in the car, she gives her reason for joining the force: 'I want to shoot people'. This admission of cruelty, even in jest, aligns her with the homicidal Eugene, and with her own brutal father. It also serves to expose the opportunities for sadistic aggression beneath the noble facade of the official state organization. Indeed it is implied throughout the narrative that a dark complicity exists between Megan and Eugene as dealers of death. He is first drawn to her whilst watching her kill the robber and is impressed by her coolness: 'You didn't even blink'. This apparent detachment contrasts with his own emotional



'I want to shoot people': Meg (Jamie Lee Curtis), Eugene (Ron Silver) and a borrowed phallus in *Blue Steel*.
Courtesy: First Independent Films / BFI Stills.

excesses and increasingly hysterical behaviour. The act of killing does not appear to ruffle Megan's calm to any great degree – indeed the suggestion is made that she obtains satisfaction from it beyond the call of duty.

Megan's fellow cops are uneasy about her facility in using this 'borrowed' phallus, and feel that she is usurping their own prerogatives. Ironically, her superior officer accuses her of an irresponsible emotional response at the holdup of the store: 'I suggest there could have been some over-reaction on your part'. He delivers this accusation in an erect, aggressive posture, leaning over her, in an angry, raised voice, whilst she remains cool, controlled and formally respectful. The most painful moment of her suspension is her disempowerment when returning the gun; after this Eugene gains considerable ascendancy. For the final showdown between them, she is forced to use the phallic masquerade to tackle Eugene on his own terms. She knocks the cop unconscious, dresses in his clothes and borrows his gun, regaining virility. The police uniform functions as the armour of retribution. The power reversal is symbolized in the shoot-out by dress: Eugene is now scruffy and dishevelled, more like the store robber than a Wall Street bidder. The uniform lends her heroic recuperative powers, and she rapidly recovers from having her arm blasted. She acts for the respectable face of the patriarchy in exterminating the abject Eugene, who has been excessive and overt in his violent brutality and therefore must be repressed. However, she is also acting out a personal phallic battle with her father, denying and refusing a continuance of her mother's role. As her father feared, becoming a cop gives Megan the power to fulfil her deepest desires.

Megan's eventual destruction of Eugene, and symbolic triumph over her father, enables her to 'win her spurs' by violence, like Caleb in *Near Dark*. She is now accepted among the mainly male police force as an honorary member. Absorbed into the patriarchy, and having exorcized her own rebellious 'evil spirit' of phallic violence, she has completed her 'flight from femininity', refusing to repeat the pattern of her mother's marriage to a brutal man.

Megan's narrative function shares features with the woman 'hero' of the rape revenge movie genre characterized by Carol Clover as the 'Final Girl'. This character, initially sexually abused, rises up and violently dispatches her attackers. Her eventual triumph is effected by using violence to destroy the violent, using certain techniques in common with her abusers. Discussing the end of *Texas Chainsaw II* (Tobe Hooper, 1986), Clover suggests that the Final Girl's destruction of the villains also functions as an acting-out of the killing of repressive and devouring parents, thus delivering herself from the threat of reabsorption: 'It is this disabling cathexis to one's parents that must be killed in the service of sexual autonomy. When

¹⁶ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁸ Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and male subjectivity', *Camera Obscura*, vol. 17 (1988), p. 40.

the Final Girl stands at last in the light of day with the Knife in her hand, she has delivered herself into the adult world.'¹⁶

Because of her 'masculinity complex' and status as an only child and her father's 'heir', Megan appears to desire to replace him, usurping his position, and offering her mother the love and protection he has failed to provide. Clover suggests that the Final Girl provides a surrogate for the mainly adolescent slasher audience with Oedipal longings:

if that paternal agent can be coded in such a way as to make him necessarily or deservingly killed . . . in order to clear the way for the subject to establish 'his' own claim (to the land, to the mother) better yet. Raped and battered, the 'boy' rises to exterminate his paternal aggressor, all in the name of justice.¹⁷

An unexplored, or repressed, alternative possibility for Megan to find fulfilment is hinted at in the 'family photographs' sequence at the graduating ceremony. This would be her role as 'father' in a triad with another woman and a child. Although this is hinted at briefly, it disappears as emphasis shifts to the perverse heterosexual attachment between Megan and Eugene. He deliberately and brutally cuts her off from such a possibility by his murder of Tracey. Since Megan also functions as a male figure, her attachment to Eugene might be homosexual too.

One of the most disturbing narrative elements in *Blue Steel* is Megan's fascination with Eugene and their developing relationship, when the audience already recognizes his psychopathic urges to homicide. Repelled by her biological father's brutality, she has chosen an even more monstrous male to desire and admire. Her substitute family, the Police, are in cahoots with the law and capitalism against a woman of low class, gender and professional status.

Kaja Silverman's study 'Masochism and male subjectivity' is useful in explaining the workings of Megan's idealization of the Police. The Force functions as an embodiment of her own superego in its 'paternal' capacity, being

another component of the super-ego, whose gender is much more delimited than that of the ego-ideal. This other component, I would maintain, is formed through the interjection of the symbolic Father as Law, Gaze, voice on high. This element of the super-ego has no necessary relation to any historical figure, but its gender is irreducibly masculine, at least within the present social order. It is, quite simply, the paternal function, and the ego is always already guilty in relation to it, guilty by virtue of Oedipal desire.¹⁸

Besides wishing to placate this symbolic function by her jealous obedience to its discipline, Megan also temporarily invests Eugene

with charismatic power. Literally, he provides access to the omnipotent gaze when they fly out over New York in the helicopter. These impressive aerial shots of the Empire State, Chrysler Building and Wall Street by night suggest Eugene's soaring ego and power obsessions, and Megan is greatly impressed. The tenuousness of this omnipotent vision is embodied in her dream that night, when Eugene flings her out of the helicopter to her death. The impasse holding Megan trapped is patriarchal power which she both fears and desires, and this forms one of the film's chief horrors.

As a defence against this repressive power, she assumes its outward signifiers herself. This presumption is made to appear auto-destructive in a concrete sense when her initialled bullets are found in the corpses of Eugene's victims. Her attempt to become more phallic than the phallus is overdetermined, and suggests the patriarchy's hegemonic attempt to absorb and negate difference.

Carol Clover has posited that the Final Girl, some of whose characteristics Megan shares, is a surrogate or transvestite male. This suggestion could be applied to many female heroes constructed by male directors (such as Ripley in the *Alien* movies [Ridley Scott, 1987; James Cameron, 1986; David Fincher, 1992]) who are coded 'masculine' in their heroic function. Clover argues that the adolescent male horror fan gains masochistic pleasure from the Final Girl's 'feminine' suffering and victimization, then switches to an active, sadistic mode as she becomes 'masculine' as a violent revenger. Her view draws on the narrative rules of the western heroic tradition 'the very unanimity of which bears witness to the historical importance, in popular culture, of the literal representation of heroism in male form'.

She is, however, concerned to stress that it *does* make a difference to have the hero gendered female because it enables her to defend herself without the help of a male rescuer to slay the monsters on her behalf. 'Abject terror may still be gendered feminine, but the willingness of one immensely popular current genre to represent the hero as an anatomical female would seem to suggest that at least one of the traditional marks of heroism, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine.'¹⁹

This lack of dependence on a male protector is clearly evinced in the relationship between Megan and Nick. It could be argued that traditional roles have been reversed here, with Nick taking on the lesser role, in the latter part of the film, as the hero's sidekick. He is visually 'feminized', with blond curls, fair skin, blue eyes and a gentle manner; although capable of crude sexual banter early in the narrative. In this he contrasts with Eugene, who is dark, hairy and aggressive, unable to control his outbursts of hysterical emotion. Nick can also be seen as caring and maternal to Megan when he gently leads her away from the scene of Tracey's murder, and later in the narrative makes tender, affectionate love with her. Just before

19 Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, p. 60.

the final showdown between hero and villain he is shot by the jealous Eugene, and hospitalized, leaving Megan to act as Eugene's nemesis, which she does with determination.

Despite the predominance of 'masculine' masquerade, Megan retains several characteristics of 'femininity' which suggest androgyny rather than a complete 'flight from womanhood'. Again, Clover's depiction of the Final Girl is relevant here:

She alternates between registers from the outset: before her final struggle, she endures the deepest throes of 'femininity', and even during the final struggle, she is now weak and now strong, now flees the killer and now charges him . . . she is a physical female and a characterological androgyne . . . not masculine but either/or, both, ambiguous.²⁰

Bigelow emphasizes the masquerade elements in Megan's police attire and role, and it seems to have been assumed as a direct reaction to her oppressive and sadistic father. At several points in the narrative we see Megan taking a break from her phallic role. At Tracey's barbecue, for example, she wears casual 'feminine' clothes, including a miniskirt, and dresses in a crimson clinging dress for her date with Eugene – on both occasions she uses makeup and wears her hair loose. This could also be viewed as a contrast between public, professional attire and private, social dress. Howard's amazement results from his assumption that she doesn't *look* like a cop because she is too pretty and feminine. As well as changing her outward image, she confesses to her girlfriend that she would also like to meet the 'right' man and have kids, which suggests that the 'feminine' side of Megan is only temporarily repressed.

But finally, I would like to offer a brief outline of theories concerned with the constitution of horror in fantasy, with particular emphasis on the genre's erotic components, and in the light of Steve Neale's suggestion in *Genre* that what constitutes horror is 'not the violence as such, but its conjunction with images and definitions of the monstrous'.²¹ Clearly this 'monstrous' element will vary depending on those social and psychic formations constituting each spectator, but the prevalence of certain visual motifs, narrative structures, and sound effects would suggest common ground of audience response.

Psychoanalytic theories have proved particularly useful in exploring the relationship between horror and the erotic. Sexually charged *frissons* bear a close connection to the revulsion and visceral affects of horrific fantasy material. Freud's concept of *der Todestrieb*, and its reworking by other analysts and theorists, throws doubt on whether pleasure and pain can function in complete autonomy, and explores their interrelationship.

The darker side of the Romantic movement associated pleasure and horror from its earliest manifestations – Coleridge's *Christabel* and Keat's *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* are obvious

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²¹ Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1982), p. 60.

examples of what Barbara Creed calls the 'monstrous feminine' in her essay on *Alien*. Poe, in 'The imp of the perverse', enthused about the prospect of self-annihilation as a *frisson* which 'chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror'.²²

De Sade, in his role as iconoclast of the Enlightenment, had confidently pronounced his dictum 'There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image'.²³ The corporeal body, of both genders, is the site of the strongest *frisson*, which Richard Boothby in his study of Lacan and the death drive, describes as 'the captivating power of body horrors'.²⁴

Lacan situated the interaction of pleasure and pain in the traumatic mirror phase, necessary for the subject to become constituted and enter the Symbolic. Klein believed that their dualism emerges in the breast-feeding period, with the combination of oral gratification and phantasies of destroying and being destroyed. For Lacan, phantasies of aggression continue after the mirror phase as a subversive repudiation of the name-of-the-father, which provides gratification for the subject, and nostalgia for the lost world of the presubjective Imaginary. Lacan characterized:

A *Gestalt* proper to aggression in men [in terms of] the images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body, in short, the imagos that I grouped together under the apparently structured term of images of the fragmented body.²⁵

Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*,²⁶ explores the constitution of the abject, within patriarchy, as female and maternal. She charts taboos and ritual attempts at expulsion around the maternal body and waste matter, such as menstrual blood, within Judaic Law, for example. Despite these attempts to reject or repress corporeal matter, it retains a fascination which has resulted in its continued representation and signification. John Lechte refers to Kristeva's identification of 'a certain emotionally charged fascination with abjection. Horror and fascination are here intertwined.'²⁷

This need to fantasize and represent the taboo object is, according to Bataille, positioned within 'human nature', because these horrors are internal 'monsters from the id'. In *Eroticism* he suggests that 'those things which repel us most violently are part of our own nature'. More recent theories, which reject both transcendent subjectivity and a Lacanian divided self in favour of a fragmented and shifting subjectivity have still worked around the body in its attraction, repulsion, and vulnerability – the essay collection *Body Invaders*,²⁸ for example, collates postmodernist writings on body horrors. Indeed certain theorists seem to posit the body as the subject writ corporeally, with its malaise and vulnerability to attack as figuring 'The death of the Subject.'

²² Edgar Allan Poe, 'The imp of the perverse', *Graham's Magazine*, XXVII (1855), p. 1.

²³ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (1962), trans. M. Dalwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1987).

²⁴ Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁷ John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 162.

²⁸ Arthur and Marilouise Kroer, *Body Invaders: Sexuality and the Postmodern Condition* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

The effect of a potent blend of horror and erotic pleasure is, according to Bataille, a *jouissance* which fragments subjectivity and triggers glimpses of annihilation. Orgasmic states of oblivion foreshadow death, and our repetition compulsion expresses *der Todestrieb*. Fantasies which feed these moments are deeply transgressive and antihumanist in their implications. Bataille believes that;

Inevitably lined with the moment of climax there is a minor rupture suggestive of death; and conversely, the idea of death may play a part in setting sensuality in motion. This mostly adds up to a sense of transgression dangerous to general stability and the conservation of life, and without it the instincts could not run their course unhindered.²⁹

²⁹ Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 106.

The fragmented self could lead to social anarchy, he suggests, conflating the body and the state à la Hobbes's *Leviathan*. In combination, the pleasure principle and the death drive produce *le petit mort, in extremis*: 'What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners? A violation bordering on death, bordering on murder!'³⁰

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Such an apocalyptic vision of social chaos resulting from explosive sexual practices appears to have been denied by hegemonic constraints. This repression has attempted to sublimate excessive, border-crossing acts into the realm of cultural fantasy. The representations and narratives provided by horror and science fiction in literature and film offer us an imaginative transgression with uncertain, circumscribed, and debatable potential for subversion.

I will now apply the most relevant of these concepts to the two Bigelow texts, in an attempt to ascertain their peaks of horror and the kinds of erotic charge they involve. I wish to consider the films as cultural practices which effect a fantasy exploration of the pleasure–pain dyad.

A certain amount of distancing within the Bigelow texts triggers spectator detachment in key scenes. She uses humour, self-reflexivity and intertextuality at particular moments which emphasize our sense that this is *only* a film and aid our disavowal process. *Near Dark* is a generic hybrid, mixing Western, horror and road movie, and *Blue Steel* is a cop crime thriller with elements of the gothic in Eugene as psycho-werewolf. There are touches of humour in character names – Severen evoking Sacher-Masoch, and the act of slicing the victim's jugular by his spur; Eugene Hunt has wolfish associations; Nick Mann is an overt pun. We first meet Mae indulging in a change from her usual diet of ice cream. The gory mayhem at the roadhouse takes place to the accompaniment of The Cramps' 'Fever' on the juke box, and Severen wisecracks 'I hate it when they haven't been shaved' as he vamps the stubbly biker. Other comic touches are the image of spotlight as full moon when Eugene is

tracked down, and the comic/cartoon-like regenerative powers of both Eugene and Severen. Their unbelievable resilience affords the fantasy of disavowal regarding the superhuman capacities of the human body. The mingling of humour and horror, probably functioning as an aid to disavowal and detachment, has been frequent in the generic tradition. Hitchcock's work overtly employs black humour, as does the recent blockbusting horror *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). Indication by the filmmakers that it is *only* a fantasy avoids severe audience shock and encourages them to come back for more. Humour itself tightropes between pleasure and pain, so is a fitting device for horror texts.

The nodal points of horror in *Near Dark* are the first kiss, the roadhouse massacre and the burnout near the end. In *Blue Steel*, the most horrifying incidents are the supermarket shooting, Eugene's murder of the hooker and the showdown duel at the end. Their structural positioning within the two narratives also suggests that the shock effects have been deliberately placed to have maximum audience impact, as part of the generic formula.

Both films signal their generic affiliations early: the eruption of violence with disturbing sexual overtones. We are given hints in the title sequences, which are so brief as to act subliminally, but potent in setting the tone and conditioning our expectations. In *Near Dark*, the first shot, in extreme closeup, is of a mosquito sucking blood, which is again a humorous reference to the 'naturalness' of vampirism. *Blue Steel* uses the sounds of violent struggle and a woman's screams even before the visual sequence unfolds. At this early stage, we do not realise that the scene is a mocked-up training sequence, so the visceral effect is as though it were 'for real'.

In *Near Dark*, the first vampire kiss overtly signals the connection between erotic pleasure and pain, and the vulnerability of the body to violation. The Vampire genre cues audience expectations of the sexual proclivities of vampire and victim, so we anticipate Caleb's masochistic groan when bitten, and also his transformation by sexual initiation. The erotically charged play and dialogue between the couple also lead us to expect a consummated seduction scene. Caleb's loss of virginity involves an intense and harrowing outlaw existence, and effects the violent social disruption as imagined by Bataille for his sexual deviants.

The next point of heightened horror is the slaughter in the bar. The violence of this scene is orgiastic, with sexual aggression leading to death, and blood trickling and spurting orgasmically as the vampires get their kicks. Amongst the sexual signifiers in the sequence are raunchy rock music and leather- and denim-clad bikers. The vampires tease their victims with sexual advances; the male-on-male violence, particularly, bears a homoerotic charge. Throughout the scene, the spectator is offered a mainly sadistic identification with the active aggression of the vampire gang.



Homer (Joshua Miller) after the massacre.



Jesse (Lance Henriksen) and Severen (Bill Paxton) on the loose.

Both stills from *Near Dark*.
Courtesy: Entertainment Film
Distributors / BFI Stills.

Sadism and masochism combine in the showdown scene where vampires burn up. The pace of the sequence is slow and dwells on the blistering and scorching flesh as the vampires are immolated. Our identification is split, as in the finale of many vampire tales, where our position shifts between Van Helsing and the Count, active and passive, staker and staked.

The apparent moral absolutes of the genre indicate that we should rejoice that the vampire's power is repressed and the surviving family are safe from the threat of evil. Most vampires, however, are romantic antibourgeois rebels, sexually seductive and dangerously exciting. After their demise, we are left with an anticlimactic vision of dull, safe domesticity. Even Mae appears willing to have her lethal teeth drawn by transfusion.

Blue Steel's narrative also hinges around three crucial incidents where sex, death and violence intersect. Initially the shooting of the store robber sets the horror narrative in motion. Megan's stalk through the supermarket alleys acts as a long, slow buildup, corresponding to the tension and suspense of sexual arousal. Her lean, taut body is the object of our gaze, and her perspiration, tense muscles and held breath also parallel the sexual scenario. Bigelow has a predilection for gun-as-phallus imagery, so overdetermined as to be comic, both in *Blue Steel* and in *Point Break* (1991). In this, her most recent film, Keanu Reeves lets Patrick Swayze escape, then lies back and fires, groaning, into the air. For some female spectators, Megan's phallic role-playing can offer a pleasurable fantasy of active female aggression – in the store sequence, the robber has subjected her to verbal abuse and sexual insult.

Eugene also fetishizes the gun as phallus, and Megan as a cold, deadly mistress. Later he asks her to point her gun at his head and becomes sexually aroused. His own relation to this fetish is a fantasy of homicidal megalomania, which he begins to act out, triggered by watching Megan as she shoots and kills. There is a masturbatory sequence where Eugene, in black leather gloves, postures with his gun before the mirror. The central scene of horror in the film occurs soon after this, and overtly conflates sex and death. We do not see the murder of the hooker, but we watch Eugene stripping and rubbing the bloody dress over his face and torso in a state of sexual excitement. The respectable, smartly-suited Wall Street broker has revealed his underlying monstrosity and bestial nature. Echoes of generic werewolf iconography depict Eugene, daubed in dirt, scrabbling under the trees of Central Park, which now suggest a wild forest, just as a street lamp projects a full moon. When startled by his 'hunters' he lopes off, beast-like into the trees. Later, Megan tracks him by a trail of bloody footprints, another werewolf characteristic. Like a monster, he possesses magical powers of recuperation when shot, and takes an unnatural length of time to dispatch.

The final scene of sex and horror is Eugene's rape of Megan and his shooting of his rival, Nick. Eugene has, by this time, been firmly established as monstrous and bestial. He attempts a brutal sexual possession of Megan, who is without a gun to protect her. The audience has just watched, in a voyeuristic position, the 'healthy' nondeviant sexual act between Megan and Nick, which is structured to form a clear contrast to the violation which follows. A disturbing element is our knowledge that Megan has previously invited Eugene into her flat, which he at first, bashfully, refuses. Their second sexual encounter involves her reluctantly agreeing to his fetishistic play with the gun, before she realises his identity. Although he wants her to play the dominant role here, Eugene remains the manipulative, controlling one, humiliating and ridiculing her by twice being released by her superior officers. Actual consummation with this lover is painful, frightening and distressing. Her self-possession and physical strength rally and she thrusts him off at the moment of his grunting, snarling climax. This disturbing sequence is redolent of her Oedipal anxieties about Frank, another brutal and domineering male. Her refusal to be destroyed by his 'evil spirit' at this point enables her ultimate and final rejection of the dangerous seductions he represents.

All sex/violence climaxes in *Blue Steel* are heterosexual and carry 'deviant' sadomasochistic connotations – such as the closeup of Eugene clenching his handcuffed fists as Megan is humiliated by her superior officer's reprimands. The film's significant lesbian popularity suggests, however, that different readings than the gender positions represented by Bigelow are possible. *Near Dark* and *Blue Steel* are, on the surface, the most heterosexually-oriented of Bigelow's films, as she shows a predilection for homoerotic relations in *The Loveless* and *Point Break*. It would be possible, however, to argue that Mae and Megan are sufficiently androgynous to continue this trend, if we wish to read them as surrogate males.

Near Dark and *Blue Steel* both provide representations of active strong, desiring women who reject some aspects of conditioned 'femininity'. Bigelow's female characters are still, however, ambiguous and problematic as liberatory fantasy figures. Her recycling of repressive scenarios such as penis envy and the *vagina dentata* are nonreflexive. The movies are exciting, visually powerful and viscerally affective, but they seem to privilege masculinity and the phallus as primary signifiers. The prominent women characters can be read as 'one of the boys' to some extent. They do, however, offer a critique of patriarchy by locating repression and fear within the 'normal' family. Their alternative family groupings offer potential spaces for women characters, and viewers, to act out their repressed desires in fictional form. As they are both horror texts, the activities of this released libido are manifest in dark and

disturbing shapes. These two Bigelow films are significant and resonant contributions to a growing body of horror fantasy made by women, as new transmutations of feminist work enable its own repressed to return.

René Clair, Marcel Pagnol and the social dimension of speech

CHRISTOPHER FAULKNER

1 (René Clair, *Cinema, Yesterday and Today* (New York: Dover, 1972), p. 120. A chapter is entitled 'A visit to the monster'.

The broad terms of the dispute between René Clair and Marcel Pagnol about the coming of sound to the French film industry – Pagnol's support for speech and Clair's antagonism (he called it 'a fearful monster, an unnatural creation')¹ – are sufficiently well known not to require full elaboration. It is worth remembering, nevertheless, that the substance of their dispute was the common currency of debates everywhere between antagonists and proponents of speech in the cinema, with the antagonists commanding a far larger press and far greater critical respect. For someone like Paul Rotha, writing in England, the 'division of appeal' produced by the conflict of sight with sound destroyed the dramatic and emotional effect achieved by the purity of the silent film and created a 'literary' and too 'realistic' hybrid:

. . . when a visual image is seen on the screen and dialogue is synchronised to its action, although the visual image is received quicker than the dialogue, the latter commands more attention, for it is *literary* and non-imaginative. There results immediate confusion in the joint appeals of the *reality* of the visual image and the *realism* of the dialogue. Continual adjustment and readjustment of the senses occurs, which is an inconceivable state of mind for the sympathetic reception of the dramatic emotions of the film as a unity.

It may be concluded that a film in which the speech and sound effects are perfectly synchronised and coincide with their visual images on the screen is absolutely contrary to the aim of the cinema. It is a degenerate and misguided attempt to destroy the

² Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now* (London: Spring Books, 1967), pp. 405, 408. These remarks were originally published in 1930.

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 75, 154. Arnheim was writing in 1933.

⁴ Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism; Volume II: 1929–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 17–20.

⁵ Alan Williams, *Republic of Images* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 200.

real use of the film and cannot be accepted as coming within the true boundaries of the cinema. Not only are dialogue films wasting the time of intelligent directors, but they are harmful and detrimental to the culture of the public. The sole aim of their producers is financial gain, and for this reason they are to be resented.²

In Germany, Arnheim's defence of cinema as an art was predicated on film's ability to overcome the illusion of transparency – an ability which was threatened by the advent of sound:

The temptation to increase the size of the screen goes with the desire for colored, stereoscopic, and sound film. It is the wish of people who do not know that artistic effect is bound up with the limitations of the medium and who want quantity rather than quality. They want to keep on getting nearer to nature and do not realize that they thereby make it increasingly difficult for film to be art.

The introduction of sound film must be considered as the imposition of a technical novelty that did not lie on the path the best film artists were pursuing. They were engaged in working out an explicit and pure style of silent film, using its restrictions to transform the peep show into an art. The introduction of sound film smashed many of the forms that the film artists were using in favour of the inartistic demand for the greatest possible 'naturalness' (in the most superficial sense of the word).³

The terms of both Rotha's and Arnheim's arguments are aesthetic, formalist and essentialist, and it has to be asked whether those terms render fully the deeper and more disturbing issues provoked by the debate.

This argument and its terms are now seldom restated, nor its implications rethought, precisely because its aesthetic tenor now seems without interest. The Clair–Pagnol debate itself has virtually disappeared from the current critical literature, and even from general film histories. With regard to French cinema studies, Richard Abel devotes a couple of pages to it in the second volume of his *French Film Theory and Criticism*, and thankfully reprints some of the pertinent primary texts.⁴ Alan Williams, however, in his new history of French cinema, *Republic of Images*, devotes but one paragraph expressly to the debate, and concludes: 'The debate continued, as French intellectual disputes can, generating more heat than light throughout the first half of the decade'.⁵ What Williams forgets is that heat is of course as much a form of energy as light. In any case, the virtual disappearance of this debate from film history warrants a few sober observations.

First, as broadly understood, the aesthetic issues in the debate have obviously lost their explanatory power when it comes to

illuminating the actual and far-ranging complexities of the transition from silent to sound cinema. Second, any acknowledgement of the general historical currency of the differences between Clair and Pagnol needs to be tempered by a recognition of the appropriateness of those differences to some particularities of the situation in France. Third, in the light of such particularities, the manifest issues in the Clair–Pagnol debate actually need to be recast, so that it can be properly restored to history. The aesthetics of sound should be seen as merely symptomatic rather than absolutely determinant of what was at stake.

It is this last point that I want to develop here. I contend that what appears to be a dispute about aesthetic matters can readily be understood as a displacement of social concerns about interests, audiences, values and, above all, the relations of power that structured class and other differences in French society in the early thirties. If seen in that light, the very recognition of those social differences, and the limits of their representability, are dependent upon the disputed conceptions of narrative cinema that Clair and Pagnol each proposed as the future of French film in the thirties. It is by now a truism that textual strategies are also social strategies; thus it follows that Clair and Pagnol make social relations differently intelligible through their specific forms of representation with sound. In short, I want to argue that a cultural politics can be deduced from what on the face of it is merely an aesthetic dispute.

The fact that we know with hindsight that the future of sound actually lay with Pagnol and not Clair (despite the critical acclaim accorded the latter) should not detract from the importance of their confrontation. That Clair eventually came to embrace the new technologies of sound recording and reproduction, and that he anticipated developments such as videotape, the microchip and digitalization in his foreword to the French editions of *Cinema Yesterday and Today* does not matter to the historical specificity of their debate. It is important, I think, that their debate took place in public in the popular film papers and the mass-circulation press between 1929 and 1933. We cannot remain indifferent to this historical moment, even though it is true that direct political and historical signs of reference remain very much obscured in the debate itself. So far as the actual historical conjuncture is concerned, it should be noted that this confrontation took place at a moment not only of technological and artistic crisis in the French film industry, but also (with the belated impact of the Depression on France) of social and economic crisis for the country, and on the eve of what would soon be a growing workers' movement against domestic and foreign fascism. One noteworthy consequence for France of the Depression in Europe was a rise in its immigrant population, which led to the sort of public consternation that inevitably fuelled xenophobic attitudes and emboldened rightwing

nationalist organisations like the *Action française*. The political outcome of these social and economic developments was the government of the Popular Front; the filmic outcome was the socially-conscious cinema of the leftwing parties, and of directors like Vigo, Renoir, and Carné.

In the exaggerations that come with public debate, a certain amount of nonsense was talked by both Pagnol and Clair concerning the implications of sound. Both were inclined to be prescriptive, and Pagnol certainly knew less about cinema, technically and aesthetically, than Clair. However, Pagnol showed no interest in cinema before the arrival of sound, did not produce his first film until 1931 (when the possibilities for adapting his play *Marius* were put to him by Robert Kane at Paramount in Paris) and did not direct his first film until 1933, and perhaps this very lack of experience meant that he was less encumbered by a priori considerations of what cinema should be or do, or of whom it should be for. It was Clair, the younger of the two, and the established avant gardist (an appropriate oxymoron here), who tended towards an essentialist – and thus regressive – position in his defence of silent cinema as ‘pure film’ and a cinema of ‘pure images’.⁶ As with Rotha, anything less was defamed as ‘literature’, and could not be claimed for cinema. What Clair was defending was not only a practice that permitted a desirable flexibility and mobility in the arrangement of images uncontaminated by sound, but also, like Arnheim, a cinema whose effect upon the spectator was not necessarily grounded in the representation of a recognizable everyday reality or dependent upon psychological realism. The least of cinema’s strengths, with or without sound, was its capacity for mimesis, its capacity to repress the signifier. This ‘art of imitation’ that Clair attacked with his formalist ideal of the cinema is precisely what Pagnol with his ‘canned theatre’ gaily defended, both in his writing and by filming his own plays, especially *Marius* (d. Alexander Korda, 1931) and *Fanny* (d. Marc Allégret, 1932).⁷ For the future-directed Pagnol, sound arrived to ‘complete’ the cinema and secure the codes of realism.⁸

In point of fact, the position that each takes up around the issue of realism will have far more telling filmic and social implications for the French thirties than whether or not the new cinema is to be labelled a ‘literary’ cinema. For the importance of the realist enterprise – especially the *poetic* realist enterprise – as its merits came to be debated in the later thirties, lay with its historicity not with its purely formal or representational characteristics. However naive we might regard such claims today, realism was contentious then because it could show contemporary social life in its immediacy and topicality, particularly the urban environment and the hardships of working people, and in the speech of the streets rather than of the salon. The attitudes towards realism evinced by Georges Sadoul

6 Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, p. 100: ‘... a film fragment becomes pure cinema as soon as a sensation is aroused in the viewer by purely visual means’.

7 For Clair’s remarks on sound cinema as an ‘art of imitation’, see René Clair, ‘Film authors don’t need you’, in Abel, *French Film Theory*, p. 58. See also Clair, *The Cinema Yesterday and Today*, pp. 127, 133.

8 See Marcel Pagnol, ‘Cinematography of Paris’, in Abel, *French Film Theory*, especially pp. 134–5.

9 For an expression of Sadoul's views see his 'Apropos several recent films', in Abel, *French Film Theory*, pp. 218–23. For some discussion of Rebattet's views on realism and on poetic realism in particular see my 'Theory and practice of film reviewing in France in the 1930s: Eyes right (Lucien Rebattet and *Action Française* 1936–1939)' in *French Cultural Studies*, 3, (1992), pp. 133–55.

10 See Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 140–50; and Lucy Fischer, 'Clair and *Le Million*', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1977), pp. 34–50.

11 Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, pp. 144, 120.

on the left and Lucien Rebattet (François Vinneuil) on the extreme right are to some extent given in advance by the positions taken up by Pagnol and Clair, although it must be understood that no political partisanship is to be attributed to either.⁹

Clair of course modified his initial, absolute objection to any and all sound on film. His first four sound films all explore the inventive possibilities of music and effects, frequently employed asynchronously and contrapuntally. In his preferred genre of comedy the non-naturalistic could thrive, and was well served by the story materials of silent film comedy, such as chases, capricious plots, and devices like sight gags. Claudia Gorbman and Lucy Fischer in their analyses of *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930) and *Le Million* (1931) respectively, have demonstrated the formal variety and thematic necessity of Clair's use of music and effects.¹⁰ But perhaps Clair's most expressive and contradictory defense of his position is his 1931 film *A nous la liberté*, a film which is never read for what it is, a clever satire on the machinery of illusion-making (and on mimesis in general) in which the mass-reproduction technology of the phonograph – in a factory run like a prison – stands in for the sound motion picture. The metaphor is appropriate since that first industrialist of the cinema, Charles Pathé, got his start in the business of illusions by selling records and record players. And in the film, the manufacture of illusions is held to be synonymous with the industrialization and commercialization of the cinema, a refrain to which Clair returned again and again in his writings.¹¹ The cleverness of the film is due in large part to the use of cinema-specific techniques to accomplish its satire. For example, the hero Emile's (and our) momentary impression that 'the girl' in the window is waving to him depends on the delayed revelation of an offscreen space that locates 'the rival', which then induces our chuckle at Clair's wit and Emile's embarrassment. Clair's attack on mimesis through the manipulation of the spatio-temporal 'logic' of his medium situates him firmly in the tradition of well-tried efforts in other modernist art practices. *A nous la liberté* is about both the effect of realism and how that effect is achieved. It exposes the material heterogeneity of sound and image as (re)produced. One of the most famous cinema-specific gags of this sort involves the synchronization of the girl's lip movements with a song on a gramophone record. Our (and Emile's) illusion that she is singing in direct sound is sustained until the gramophone slows down and the voice on the record drones to a halt. The insight achieved here does not lie simply with foregrounding the apparatus, but in the revealed knowledge that the effect of auditory realism depends upon our accepting the ontological identity of real with recorded sound. There can hardly be any question about the object of Clair's satire. On the other hand, rather than simply mock technology as antagonistic to some utopian world of feeling, as Clair does, Pagnol's trilogy of

Marius, *Fanny* and *César* (1936), makes the unresolvable *tension* between tradition and technology one of its most productive themes. The streetcar halted by the exciting game of *boules*, Marius' work with scientific instruments while on his lovesick sea voyage (he becomes a garage mechanic in *César*), the competition that the old sailmaker Panisse acknowledges with Renault when he finally makes the decision to invest in motors (we do not see him get to Paris to make the investment because he leaves the train station and returns home out of worry about Césariot's whooping cough) and numerous other examples all suggest that process and change are stubbornly necessary, painful and possible, and thus situate Pagnol's work as thematically central to any definition of French culture and society in the thirties.

Throughout his writing at this period, Pagnol is mindful of the condition and position of the spectator to an extent that Clair is not. For Pagnol, the gain in sound that accompanies the cinema's visual command over space allows the film spectator to internalize his/her identification with a fictional character to a degree not thought possible before:

First of all, we are no longer bound by the dimensions of the hall. Since the spectator sees and hears exactly as the lens and microphone have seen and heard, we can move the camera forward and backward as we please and, by such means, move our spectator forward and backward without tiring him in the least. We can show him a face from a distance of one or two feet, as if he has approached the better to see a tear form and fall. On the silent screen, Charlot has already shown us the incomparable power of an eye blink or a tremulous lip. We can write a scene in whispers, and make it understandable to three thousand people, without changing the pitch and tone of the whispering. . . . Here's a new domain, that of a purely psychological tragedy or comedy, which can be conveyed without cries and large gestures, with a wonderful simplicity and a balance up to now unknown simply because it was impossible.¹²

12 Marcel Pagnol, 'The Talkie offers the writer new resources', in Abel, *French Film Theory*, p. 56.

It is Pagnol's sensitivity, on behalf of his spectator's inner life, to the power of a falling tear or a whispered confidence that allows him to achieve his famous *chaleur humaine*. In his own first sound films, the immobility of the image and the infrequency of shot/reverse shot structures preserve the integrity of Pagnol's diegetic world and draw attention to the thematic importance placed upon the relation of private to public space and private to public feeling. An obvious example is the penultimate scene in *Marius*, in which Fanny faints in the would-be marriage chamber, while César shouts 'Marius' from the window that gives on to the harbour and a view of his parting ship. Fanny's fainting suggests the sublimation of the private desire made articulate and public in César's cry; a desire she articulated in

the very first scene and the very first word of the film as she softly called 'Marius' to her daydreaming lover on the public wharf outside the *Bar de la Marine*. The film continually finds ways of mediating between public and private spaces and feelings to suggest how powerfully the state of intimate (usually familial) relations is bound up with the larger social good. Not only is space gendered (conventionally as public/masculine and private/feminine) but our *experience* of the final and penultimate scenes of the film is also gendered: first of all we are in the room with close shots of Fanny's bodily expression of pain and desire and then we are given two or three high-angled views of the ship leaving the harbour accompanied by César's voiceover 'Marius' – the last word of the film. By contrast, Clair's emphasis on rhythm, movement and variety, in the succession of images and in the relations between image and sound, that makes his practice a cinema of time is a continual reminder of a sovereign and controlling narrative presence. For a film like *A nous la liberté*'s self-reflexive treatment of illusion-making to be grasped at all – and to be grasped as witty – the spectator must tacitly acknowledge and connive with the authority of this implied narrator. Ironically, if this detachment is the very condition of narrative understanding, it helps explain why Clair's idealized world of feeling in his films is actually so little felt by the spectator. In theory and practice, then, by invocation or neglect, both Clair and Pagnol seem aware that the advent of sound signals some fundamental change in the relationship of spectator and film. And at the heart of the matter is the role and function of speech to their different conceptions of narrative cinema.

Here is a famous passage by René Clair, written in May 1929:

In its best form, the talking picture is no longer photographed theatre; it is itself. Then, in its variety of sounds and its orchestration of human voices, it seems richer than the silent cinema. But isn't its richness false and its luxury ruinous? The screen is losing more than it is gaining by this 'progress'. It is conquering the world of voices but losing the world of dreams over which the silent cinema reigned. I observed the spectators leaving after hearing a talking picture. They seemed to be leaving a vaudeville theatre. They were not plunged into that comfortable numbness which a trip to the land of pure images used to bestow on us. They were talking, laughing and humming the last refrain they had heard. *They had not lost the sense of reality.*¹³

The assumptions and implications of these remarks are manifold. Why *would* one want to lose 'the sense of reality', it might be asked? One might, perhaps, if one wanted to idealize the one at the expense of the many, a totalizing identity at the expense of differentiated identities. The language of Clair's eulogy for the silent cinema evokes hypnosis, dream, hallucination, the mystical, and on

13 Clair, *Cinema, Yesterday and Today*, p. 141.

behalf of an audience which is presented as undifferentiated and homogeneous. What Clair seems to object to is an audience made up of distinct members who are producers of their social reality rather than consumers of a distracting fantasy. Perhaps that is why 'the world of voices' and 'the world of dreams' are construed as antithetical. 'Let us point out', he says, 'that the state of mind peculiar to the spectator of a film is not without analogy to the condition of a man dreaming'.¹⁴

Until his departure from France in 1934, Clair never overcame his fundamental objection, either in his film practice or his criticism, to speech or voice in the cinema: 'We mustn't forget that up until now nothing that contributed the slightest thing to the cinema's grandeur ever spoke', he said.¹⁵ Pagnol, on the other hand, is said to have chosen takes by listening first to the soundtrack!¹⁶ And on this matter of speech – rather than music or effects – hangs what is ultimately telling about the social aspect of their argument. Pagnol does not simply take a playwright's view of what is important about the centrality of speech to the new cinema; he takes a populist view. Speech enlarged his audience. As Renoir said with approval: 'The talkies brought to the cinema quantities of spectators that the art of the silent scarcely interested. . . . Isn't it marvellous . . . that the great popular masses are able, today, to appreciate a work like *César* – that at another time only the clientele of a Parisian theatre would have been able to know?'¹⁷

It is surely no historical accident that Walter Benjamin's most famous essay ('The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'), an essay that has so much to say about film, should have been drafted and written shortly after the advent of sound to the cinema:

the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura . . . rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.¹⁸

Pagnol's valuation of speech to the presence of bodies in space brings things 'closer', 'humanly', and thus serves the mass or popular interest. Clair's fear of represented speech, 'that old human bondage' as he disapprovingly called it, is a fear of its referentiality and its social potential.¹⁹ (Speech is always anchored in and by its appropriate *social* space, after all.) In their arguments and in their practice, therefore, Clair and Pagnol construct subjectivities quite differently around this question of speech. Clair constructs an ideal, universal and transhistorical spectator whereas Pagnol's spectator has a local, particular and material existence. I have already suggested that Clair's filmic practice assumes a spectator who is

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁵ René Clair, 'Talkie versus Talkie', in Abel, *French Film Theory*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Williams, *Republic of Images* p. 204.

¹⁷ Jean Renoir, in an interview with Nino Frank, *Pour Vous*, no. 451 (8 July 1937).

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 225.

¹⁹ The phrase is borrowed from an Alexandre Arnoux essay, quoted by Clair in *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, p. 129, and repeated on p. 144.

20 Both Fischer and Gorbman note the narrative control over time and space in Clair's work. Gorbman, commenting on *Sous les toits de Paris*, emphasizes its 'iron rule over time and space'. (p. 143)

21 For Altman's and Williams' dismissal of the 'reproductive' and other fallacies, see Rick Altman (ed.), *Sound Theory/Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 35–45 and 126–37. For the spatialization of the voice as necessary condition for the illusion of the real, see Mary Ann Doane, 'The voice in the cinema: the articulation of body and space', in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (eds), *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 164.

22 Tony Bennett, 'Texts in history: the determinations of readings and their texts', in Derek Attridge, et al. (eds), *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 63–81.

complicit with an implied narrator in producing a knowledge and a truth beyond criticism. This is the uncompromising voice of power and authority and its ironic 'distance' is the necessary condition for understanding.²⁰ This is of course the distance that comes with Clair's patrician slumming, turning his view of working people into a bourgeois spectacle. What one does not hear in Clair's films is the voice of social class, just as one gets no more than the visual caricatures of social types: the street singer, the *gendarme*, the *clochard*, the girl, the boy, the rival, the uncle, the fatuous bourgeois or bourgeoisie and so on. Pagnol, on the other hand, with his emphasis on speech, seems to allow for a more affective intersubjective relationship between film character and spectator. He opens out the possibility of audience pleasure through the recognition of voices which, quite apart from actual meanings, speak a truth about one's own class, gender or region. And is that not the beginnings of a politics of the voice in the cinema?

While theoreticians like Rick Altman and Alan Williams have tended to focus on the materiality of sound production in order to counteract the 'reproductive fallacy' or, like Mary Ann Doane, have wished to demonstrate the way in which sound in exhibition contributes to the illusion of the 'unified subject', they have generally overlooked the social dimension of speech and audition.²¹ Any proper recognition of this dimension would have to understand the construction of what we might call – to adapt a phrase from Tony Bennett – listening formations: that is the whole context of audition for historically specific audiences, taking account of expectations formed for them by the whole culture and technology of speech and hearing of which they are a part.²² That project is beyond the scope of this essay but suggests the need to understand the formation in France of a normative and hegemonic 'speaking degree zero', along with departures from it, by looking at the construction of the telephone voice, the role of the gramophone and popular song, the influence of the radio, and the history of speech in the movies through the thirties. These are plurivocal discursive practices that have no apparent connection with the conditions for a phenomenological auditory realism. Furthermore, the attempt to understand something as complex as a listening formation should not necessarily be restricted to auditory practices alone. Recognition of a larger, interdiscursive context might extend our understanding of the whole regime of sense within which audience expectations can be presumed to have been determined. In 1930, for example, Henri Poulaille argued in his *Nouvel âge littéraire* for a proletarian literature which would restore the language and experience of working people to prose fiction. And in 1931 the translation into French of Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?' encouraged the

²³ Poulaille saw a role for film and television in the proletarianization of culture. He planned to write a book called *Le cinéma valeur sociale* which presumably would have explored this projected role. The influence of Heidegger on the novel is discussed by Denis Hollier in his essay 'Plenty of nothing', in Denis Hollier (ed.), *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 894–900.

publication of novels by Queneau, Nizan and, eventually, Sartre that dealt with quotidian realities and in the language of what was accepted as spoken French.²³ While these developments have no *necessary* cause or effect relationship with the advent of speech to the cinema, their contemporaneity does suggest that they are pertinent to the cultural and social conditions within which audiences were attentive to what they heard. For the question that is waiting to be answered is how does a text organize itself to be heard, organize the place from which it wants to be heard and by whom it should be heard? Ultimately we want to think of listening formations as social constructions, not merely as formal, textual instances. The intention here is not to explain cultural practices by other cultural practices, but to understand how people understood their material, lived existences in historically specific instances.

We know, of course, that spoken language is unerringly social, in its timbre, tempo, accent, tone and volume – in all the qualities of voice, in other words – and there is no reason to doubt that one's response to speech comprises a complex of desires, repressions, investments and projections which shape our attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and values. The film soundtrack is therefore understood to be as much a discursive system for the formation of certain kinds of social and cultural knowledge as is the visual track. The respects in which we can talk about the coming of sound and, in particular, of speech altering fundamentally the relation of spectator to film are therefore extremely important. What sound (speech) expressly acknowledged was a linguistic diversity – Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia' – and what it created was a mass listening public, not uniform or homogeneous, but diverse, fragmented, even divided, and with potentially disruptive or unsettling social and political consequences. Clair seems to express a residual fear of this potential in a remark he made in 1929:

In London it can be observed that the Americans were not exaggerating when they told us about the extraordinary attraction the talking picture has for the masses. From noon to eleven at night, one group of spectators replaces another and the houses are always full. A few months ago the sound of American slang elicited smiles, but today no one is surprised at it any more, and tomorrow it may affect the speech of Londoners.²⁴

²⁴ Clair, *The Cinema Yesterday and Today*, p. 135.

With its unpredictable and contradictory effects, speech helps to define the relation of centre to periphery, metropole to region, governing class to underclass. Michel Marie, for example, has demonstrated the way in which the jarring accents of class-specific voices produce social conflict in Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931).²⁵ Clair's approach to sound is resistant to this potential, while Renoir's or Pagnol's approach seems to acknowledge it. As Ginette

²⁵ Michel Marie, 'The poacher's aged mother: on speech in *La Chienne* by Jean Renoir', *Yale French Studies* no. 60 (1980), pp. 219–32.

26 Ginette Vincendeau, 'In the name of the father: Marcel Pagnol's "trilogy": *Marius* (1931), *Fanny* (1932), *César* (1936)', in Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.), *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 67–82.

Vincendeau has pointed out, Pagnol's Marseille trilogy 'show-cased the Southern accent', which at the very least produced 'a recognition of cultural difference',²⁶ even though we cannot say in this instance that its effects were directly political.

In terms of community or nation, then, the widespread representation of speech opens up the problem of cultural diversity, of the socially heterogeneous, precisely at that moment in historical time when political developments in France made the easy reproduction of existing social relations a matter of contention. Speech challenges the allowable limits of difference where defining the notion of 'Frenchness' is concerned, and sound cinema complicates the problem for cinematic fictions of trying to 'imagine' the nation or the community securely and non-contradictorily. Existing social knowledge is threatened by the meaning of those 'other' voices, regions, classes, identities. The narrative conflict in Renoir's *Toni* (1934) depends for its force on the cultural differences between the northern foreman, Albert, and the Corsican, Italian and Spanish immigrant workers to the Midi. With the Depression-fed growth of immigration to the south of France, and with a countervailing xenophobia on the rise, the film's subject is clearly topical. In making the varieties of spoken French one of the principal markers of difference, while throwing its sympathies towards the immigrant characters, the film contests the idea of a singular and essential national and cultural identity. Whereas *Toni* is a film which accepts the everyday reality of a plural society, *La Marseillaise* (Jean Renoir, 1938) – an attempt to reimagine the nation for the thirties – is a film which seems to deny it. The march of the Marseille battalion to Paris is intended to demonstrate a national unity which overrides all differences. The film even managed to express this linguistically, by way of a minor detail. On the Marseillais Bomier's front door as he runs off to join the battalion is a sign which clearly reads '*Ici on parle français*', a sign which is only necessary if Provençal is being denied. Under the force of political imperatives during the period of the Popular Front, the French language – and in sound film it could only be the *spoken* French language – becomes one of the signifiers of national identity to which claim is laid by both the left and the right. The elevation of an 'official' language as evidence of allegiance to the national patrimony depends upon the suppression of other languages, other identities, and other politics. Paradoxically, it is not difficult to imagine that the presence of speech, through their fictional surrogates, might have both confirmed people's sense of their place within the existing network of social relations in the nation state and restored to people a sense of their right to be heard in their own local interests. Any attempt to ground or collapse definitions of community or nation into the single, the unified, the homogeneous, certainly becomes further problematized with the introduction of

speech to the cinema, as these examples make clear. Henceforth, from 1930, nation or community cannot be imagined filmically without speech as a contestatory element. It is inescapable that some change in the vehicle of people's imaginings will produce their social relations differently imagined – that it will, in fact, produce *people* differently.

René Clair, it is to be remembered, came to sound cinema as an active member of a modernist avant garde of the twenties. Respectful of the autonomy of art, dismissive of its social or commercial determinants, Clair once enjoyed enormous critical celebrity. His films, curiously, had far greater public appeal outside France, while Pagnol's work had a huge popular following in France but suffered critical neglect at home and abroad. Never one to idealize art over commerce, however, Pagnol knew the value of box-office rankings.²⁷ His *Fanny* and *César* were the top box-office draws for 1932 and 1936 respectively. With family conflict and regional life providing his subject matter, Pagnol tapped into older, popular entertainment traditions, like melodrama and vaudeville, well outside the interests of the avant garde.

As with Rotha and Arnheim, Clair's repression of speech is homologous with the well-documented modernist repression of mass and popular culture. As 'the other of modernism, the specter that haunts it', to quote Andreas Huyssen, 'mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project', which is itself nothing so much as 'a reaction formation'. 'The autonomy of the modernist art work, after all, is always the result of a resistance, an abstention, and a suppression – resistance to the seductive lure of mass culture, abstention from the pleasure of trying to please a larger audience, suppression of everything that might be threatening to the rigorous demands of being modern and at the edge of time'.²⁸ Furthermore, Huyssen demonstrates that historically the disdain for mass culture as inferior and inauthentic led to its being gendered discursively as feminine. The ascription of femininity to mass culture and to mass movements becomes an attempt to disavow their political threat and to defend against a potential loss of power. The implications of Pagnol's work within the traditional and popular genre of melodrama seem obvious. In repressing the social significance of speech, Clair's intention may not have been to repress the mass or the popular, or any other 'other', but that was unquestionably the effect of his position.²⁹ Again, perhaps mindful of the advent of sound, it was the release of the power of the mass that Walter Benjamin referred to when he talked about the 'tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind . . . [whose] most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage'.³⁰ And

²⁷ See Marcel Pagnol, 'Cinematography of Paris', in Abel, *French Film Theory* p. 130.

²⁸ Andreas Huyssen, 'Mass culture as woman: modernism's other', in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 200, 191, 201, 198–9.

²⁹ Writing in 1970, Clair seems to have recognized as much: 'Only nostalgic dilettantes still believe that two cinemas should exist: one for the public and one for an alleged elite. I thought so myself at the time when it was necessary to protect a "quality" cinema from catastrophe.' Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, p. 212.

³⁰ Benjamin, in *ibid.*, p. 223.

the subtext here is that liquidation of the cultural heritage will give rise not only to the cultural aspirations of masses of people but to their political aspirations as well. The repression of the varieties of (popular) speech is therefore the repression of a disruption, an excess, an energy, which threatens the limits of social control. This is a matter of great critical moment at this historical conjuncture, inasmuch as the management of dissent, in the interests of maintaining a stable and homogeneous society, became a central concern of French cinema and society in the thirties.

Finally, I think it no coincidence that Clair's biggest boosters were the French fascist critics Lucien Rebatet, in his weekly film reviews for *L'Action française*, and Robert Brasillach and Maurice Bardèche in their 1935 *Histoire du cinéma* – a book to which Clair contributed a preface in the *Oeuvres complètes* of Robert Brasillach published in 1963, and whose nostalgic epitaph for the silent cinema Clair quoted approvingly in *Cinema Yesterday and Today*: 'We who have seen an art being born may also have seen it die'.³¹ For the fascist critics, Clair was the one undoubted auteur of the French cinema, and Bardèche and Brasillach even went so far as to identify 'l'école de René Clair' to which they assigned half a dozen French filmmakers. Alice Yeager Kaplan, in her *Reproductions of Banality*, has accurately identified the ambivalence toward sound and the nostalgia for the lost community of the silents expressed by Brasillach and Bardèche in their influential *Histoire*.³² She points out that they excoriated sound as the ultimate degradation of film art aesthetically, because it was henceforth obliged to the vulgar, material realism of everyday life, and politically, because in their febrile xenophobia they could suddenly hear the vocal accents of all of deracinated Europe gathered on French soil.

Films were made by wandering Slavic directors, Germans who spoke no English, Frenchmen who spoke no German, actors whose voices their own mothers could not recognize, singers with tiny voices whose songs were magnified by the microphone, Austrians who assumed Hollywood accents when making French versions of pictures. Just as Elmer Rice has written a satire on the silent films in *Purilia*, so Paul Morand has provided us with one on the talkies in *France la Douce*. Here we see what becomes of a scenario by Joseph Bédier when it has been rewritten by d'Annunzio, edited by a German schoolmistress, put into dubious French by someone newly arrived from the Ukraine and from which all of a sudden it is necessary to remove every 'b' which occurs in the dialogue, as one fillets the bones from a fish, because the leading lady from London pronounces them unpleasingly.³³

In their scorn, Bardèche and Brasillach are no doubt first alluding to the Paramount Studios at Joinville which were equipped between

31 Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, p. 125; Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *The History of Motion Pictures* (New York: Arno Press, 1970 reprint of the 1938 English translation), p. 302.

32 Alice Yeager Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), especially pp. 147–53.

33 Bardèche and Brasillach, *The History of Motion Pictures*, p. 325.

1931 and 1933 to produce multiple language versions of films by employing an international personnel. The allusion to the notoriously xenophobic and anti-Semitic Paul Morand is additionally revealing. His grotesque 1934 novel *France la Douce* is a vicious 'satire' of the deals and swindles involved in producing a 'French' film with the same title by a fly-by-night production company called Etherfilm, controlled by individuals called Isidore Jacobi, Kalitrich, Sacha Sacher and Hermeticos. The principal victim of their swindle is a naive Breton Count named Kergaël, whose ancestral lands and accumulated fortune date from the fifteenth century, while the subject matter of the film itself is proffered by Morand as a further abuse against the national patrimony since it is a butchered adaptation of the *Chanson de Roland*. The executive producer of the film is an Armenian named Kanapèjan, none of the production personnel is French-born, and the director is a German-Jewish refugee named Max Kron. If Paul Morand served as a screen for their anti-Semitism in 1935, in subsequent editions of their *Histoire du cinéma*, Bardèche and Brasillach made it explicit that their hatred of others was concentrated in and by their anti-Semitism. What Bardèche and Brasillach feared from sound was just that exposure of the myth of the exclusive identity of the linguistic and national unity which Morand had tried to sustain in his heavy-handed way. This connection between linguistic purity and integral nationalism was an obsessive rightwing cultural and political theme throughout the thirties. One has only to recall the play with the phonetics of speech and social identity in the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline which culminated in the vitriol of his *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1938), or the later film reviews of his epigone Lucien Rebatet and the latter's *Les tribus du cinéma et du théâtre* (1941).

I hope to have demonstrated that the issues in the Clair-Pagnol debate were played for some very high stakes indeed – even if the principals were not fully conscious of their implications – because they provoked crucial questions about the social function of speech in the cinema, and because the deeper issues were premonitory of much that was to preoccupy cultural and political life in 1930s France. In the light of the fascist position on sound, for example, Clair's reference to its arrival as a 'barbarian invasion' was a rather unfortunate choice of words.³⁴ In sum, for Clair as for many others, the vulgar demotic French of the 'womanized' talking picture became the site of displaced fears and anxieties both about the barbarian masses and about the death of art at a moment in historical time when both art and the masses were beginning to confront radical change.

³⁴ Clair, *Cinema Yesterday and Today*, p. 133.

'They said we were trying to show reality – all I want to show is my video': The politics of the realist feminist documentary

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

A demonstration of contradictions I

The scene opens upon a gray steel door which itself then opens to reveal a middle-aged black woman: 'Hi, I'm Marie and I'm HIV-positive. Welcome to my home. I'd like to show you what has and has not changed here since my diagnosis. Welcome, and come in.' The camera follows Marie on an intimate tour of her apartment. For ten minutes of barely-edited footage, she moves from room to room, talking about eating with her family, cleaning the toilet, and not necessarily sleeping by herself in her double bed. In 'real time', she recounts to the camera her experiences and offers advice: 'Once I dropped AZT on the floor, and my granddaughter said "Here it is Mummy". Then I knew I had to be more careful . . . '

We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected By AIDS (The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise, 1990).

Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected.

Claire Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 29.

The legacy of misreading realist, feminist documentaries

In formulating a notion of a feminist 'counter-cinema' that would counter not only the stereotypes but also the very language of patriarchy, the British feminists rejected the cinema verite practices of the first generation of feminist documentary films.

Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams,
ReVision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, p. 7.¹

The women's movement of the early seventies was enmeshed in a politics of representation. This inspired an unprecedented deluge of feminist films, the majority of which were documentaries.² In perhaps the only significant and coherent body of feminist film theory about documentary – the so-called 'feminist realist debates'³ – feminist scholars of this period used what Doane et al. refer to as the 'rejection' of the 'cinema verité practices of the first generation of feminist documentary films' as the foundation for the critical discourse-based theory which would become Feminist Film Theory⁴ as we know it today.⁵ This has meant that as a feminist scholar of the media in the eighties and nineties, I have been instructed to believe that *realism* and *identification* – which are claimed to be axiomatic of talking heads, cinema verite, or realist documentary – are not sophisticated, or even legitimate, formal strategies. And then correspondingly, feminist documentary films and videos which use such strategies (like *We Care*, cited above) are *bad*, or at least naive, feminist projects. E. Ann Kaplan, in a chapter concerning the feminist–realist debates, concisely describes the position taken up by feminist film theorists in the seventies and beyond: 'realism as a style is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old consciousness'.⁶ Realism masks the production of meaning, identification affirms the coherence and power of the individual. 'So what actually happens then', writes Eileen McGarry in an early contribution to the debates, 'is that those relationships already coded within the dominant ideology enter into the film unquestioned by the aesthetic of realism'.⁷ Instead, Kaplan concludes, feminists need to make and view films which do four things: focus on the cinematic apparatus as a signifying practice, refuse to construct a fixed spectator, deny pleasure, and mix the codes of documentary and fiction.⁸

Such pronouncements entailed a turn towards analysis of feminist avant-garde filmmaking and a concurrent denial of more conventional, political documentary practice for the majority of feminist film critics in the late seventies and eighties. This inspired a theoretical and practical legacy which is the subject of this paper: the legacy of a large and important body of feminist film work which has been inadequately and insufficiently theorized, and the simultaneous canonization and institutionalization of only one side

¹ Since this essay is being published in a British journal, it seems especially important to consider how the history of US feminist film theory does and does not translate across the Atlantic. Although I am focusing upon the critical and film/video production of US feminists in this paper, this work is highly influenced by trends in British thought and film production – so much so that most of the Americans I will be referring to name the inspiration for the antirealist position that they articulate in the early seventies as being that of 'British feminists' in opposition to 'American feminists' who, at the time, had not incorporated critical theory into their theoretical analyses of gender and representation.

² The Whitney Museum showed twenty-five of these feminist documentaries in its January 1992 programme 'From object to subject: documents and documentaries from the women's movement'. (See extended note at the end of this article.)

³ E. Ann Kaplan entitled the chapter on women's documentary in her book *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 'The realist debate in the feminist film: a historical overview of the theories and strategies in realism and the avant-garde theory film (1971–81)'.

⁴ I've capitalized 'Feminist Film Theory' to help signify the highly canonical nature of what is in fact, a very recent, and only a small subset of a much larger and contradictory body of critical writing. Throughout this essay, I refer to the few authors and texts which have been much anthologized as 'feminist film theory', even as I am aware that the tradition of feminist writing on film is more diverse than this body of selected texts would demonstrate.

- 5 The writings which participate in this 'debate' include: Christine Gledhill, 'Recent developments in feminist film criticism', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 4 (1978), pp. 458-93; Claire Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', Claire Johnston (ed), *Notes on Women's Cinema*. (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983). The aforementioned chapter is revised and expanded in the article 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', in Alan Rosenthal (ed.), *New Challenges for Democracy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 78-102; Julia Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall (1978), pp. 507-23; Eileen McGarry, 'Documentary, realism, and women's cinema', *Women and Film*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1975), pp. 50-57.
- 6 Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 131.
- 7 McGarry, 'Documentary, realism and women's cinema', p. 53.
- 8 Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 138.
- 9 Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary', p. 510.

- 10 The video work of Repro-Vision, a feminist collective devoted to documenting the recent upsurge of reproductive rights activism, either consciously or unconsciously quotes many of the techniques and subject matter of seventies feminist documentaries. For instance, the group is currently producing a tape about feminist self-health.

of the 'feminist-realist debates', that which centred upon these early feminist documentaries. Perhaps the most disturbing consequence of this legacy is the loss of many of these films for reevaluation due to the economic relationship between film scholarship and alternative film distribution: only twenty years later, they are very difficult, if not impossible to find.

Manohla Dargis begins her review of the Whitney Museum's 1992 programme of seventies feminist documentaries, 'From object to subject: documents and documentaries from the women's movement', by contemplating her lack of exposure to this body of film work. Dargis and I, both products of NYU graduate Cinema Studies in the eighties, saw a great deal of Rainer, Potter, Akerman, and Mulvey in our classes. But I didn't see realist, feminist documentaries until I began teaching my own courses in women's documentary. However, when I tried to rent *Self-Health*, a film featured in Julia Lesage's 1978 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film', the feminist distribution companies that had carried it were no longer in business, and the film could not be found. Lesage writes that the film shows women learning how to give themselves vaginal self-exams, breast exams, and vaginal bimanual exams, and then talking together about their 'feelings about and experiences with their bodies and their sexuality'.⁹ In our present climate, where women are reinventing the feminist wheel to fight yet again for our rights to health care and reproductive freedom, it is critical for feminist educators in film and other fields to see and show these realist accounts of how women approached similar political work less than a generation before. Meanwhile, without these films to guide us, women are continuing to produce films and videos surprisingly similar in form, tone and content to those realist documentaries of the women's movement of the early seventies.¹⁰

Equally frustrating is my feminist theoretical indoctrination which was dedicated almost solely to the critique of realism and the endorsement of formalism. Although research for the writing of this project has led me to many articles from the period which argued against the move towards formalism, critical theory and the avant garde at the expense of the political work coming out of the women's movement, I was not *taught* this intervention in college or graduate school (perhaps because very few of these articles have been anthologized in text books of feminist film theory).¹¹ This results in an unsettling experience: when I attempt to view, teach or make political documentary I find that I am unequipped (at least, if I use standardized feminist film theory as my guide) to evaluate or understand the past and ongoing reliance upon 'realist' representation by feminists, AIDS activists and the like, even as we 'know better'. When I view seventies (and eighties and nineties) realist, talking-heads documentaries by feminists and other

11 Some of these articles which contest the antirealist position include: Julia Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of feminist documentary film'; Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'Talking about our lives and experiences: some thoughts about feminism, documentary and "talking heads"', in Thomas Waugh (ed.), *Show Us Life* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984); B. Ruby Rich, 'The crisis of naming in feminist film criticism', *Jump Cut*, 19 (1979); Christine Gledhill, 'Whose choice – teaching films about abortion', *Screen Education*, no. 24 (1977); and Lesley Stern, 'Feminism and cinema-exchanges', *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 3/4 (1979/80).

disenfranchised producers, and perhaps more significantly, as I make video with groups of political women, I am struck by two things: how often political producers are drawn to realist strategies and then, in contradiction, how often such work is evaluated by academics in an overly critical and sometimes simplified manner.

Where many critics have seen 'naive realism', I see and make videos that utilize a variety of 'realist' techniques with a variety of effects, only one of which is the dreaded psychoanalytic grip of 'identification'. Yet, it seems that some early feminist film theory – which has since become a kind of received wisdom – utilized relatively direct translations of Marxist concerns about 'realism' and 'bourgeois ideology' and psychoanalytic concerns about 'identification' and the 'individual' to analyze a body of political work without carefully interrogating how these terms, when applied to political documentaries, are themselves dependent upon a variety of extratextual conditions including intentionality, viewing context, economics, power, and politics. Take 'realism' for example: are the effects of the so-called realism of the narrative Hollywood film identical to those of the realism of a cinema-verite documentary? We make and view such films in noticeably different contexts and with strikingly diverse intentions. How is realism used and interpreted in either PBS-style documentaries or activist videos which quote, parody and deconstruct this style (often within the same video)? How are many of the accepted codes of 'realism' dependent upon access to funds, equipment, 'professional' formats, and the conventional ideological positions which often align with power and capital?

Such questions point to the largely overgeneralized ways that the term 'realism' (as well as a host of others including 'documentary', 'cinema verite', 'identification', 'political film', 'feminism') is used in feminist film criticism towards the valuable work of making sense of the ideological effects of the filmic apparatus. While such work has been immensely important, it has often also resulted in obscuring the *distinctions* allowed by the always unique extratextual conditions which define the production, reception and form of nonindustrial film and video, especially when film and video are primarily motivated by political urgency. If, in fact, it is true that the 'realist' style of many of the early feminist documentaries confirmed for the feminist viewer some sense of herself as a unified subject in a manner similar to how this is enacted through identification with the Hollywood film, how do we figure into this analysis that this was, simultaneously, a radical, new and politicized reinterpretation of that female subjectivity, one which mobilized vast numbers of women into action for the first time?

In the service of creating a feminist, formalist film theory, some articles were written, later to become an orthodoxy, which did not adequately describe the documentary films that they critiqued, nor

12 Several of the articles which participate in the 'debate' conclude by suggesting that practice rooted in political struggle must have some connection to the 'real'. For instance, Kaplan writes: 'But if we want to create art that will bring about change in the quality of people's daily lives in the social formation, we need a theory that takes account of the level now usually referred to scornfully as "naïvely materialistic"', *Women and Film*, p. 134. Similarly, Claire Johnston suggests: 'If a radical ideology, such as feminism, is to be defined as a means of providing a framework for political action, one must finally put one's finger on the scales, enter some kind of realist epistemology'. 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 389. However, these realist-forests were somehow missed for the semiotic-trees. The legacy of these articles centres upon their criticism of realist practices.

the experience of making or viewing politically engaged films.¹² Feminist film theory was founded upon a misreading of two integral features of feminist realist documentary: the fact that there are usually *multiple* film styles and theoretical assumptions masked by the conventions of 'realism', and more importantly, that realism and identification are used as viable theoretical strategies towards political ends within these films. Thus, for the sake of this article, I will define 'realism' and 'identification' in ways that are indebted to, but necessarily more complicated than, the way these terms have been used by many feminist film theorists in the past twenty-five years. I think my definitions point to the way I am both moulded, and frustrated, by feminist film theory in the face of directly political representational work.

By 'political' documentary, I refer to any film or video that espouses an explicit opinion or position whose articulation contributes towards some manner of change. A great deal of political documentaries use 'realist' form to do this work. By realist form, I refer to any of a number of always-changing conventions which signify for the maker and/or the spectator a condition, experience or issue found in the 'real world' or in the 'real experience' of a person or group of people within the world. A variety of realist forms can be used within any particular film and video, and often their play against each other serves as an (intentional or unintentional) critique of the use or legitimacy of mimetic style. 'Realism' can function in any of a number of ways, including, but not limited to, the confirmation, perpetuation and reflection of bourgeois, patriarchal reality. It can testify to alternative, marginal, subversive or illegal realities; it can critique the notion of reality. To portray the world with a realistic film style does not necessarily imply that one believes that the reality portrayed is fixed, stable, complete or unbiased, although it probably means that one has an opinion about what this reality means, feels like, how it functions, or how it can change. To see a representation of something that occurred in the real world is not necessarily to confuse that image with reality. In fact, politically-motivated realist documentaries are usually at great pains to show that theirs is a politicized, opinionated vision of some reality. In the same vein, I use 'identification' to refer to the unconscious psychoanalytic processes that are the function of viewing any film or video text, many of which confirm our sense of ourselves as gendered, unified individuals. Yet, I also acknowledge the many *conscious* forms of identification, misidentification, and refusal-of-identification which also occur when viewing political films or videos (which are rarely the mass forms of media – Hollywood film, broadcast television – upon which so much of our theory is based, but are, more likely, organizing tools of grassroots or activist organizations).

As a feminist, AIDS activist, media scholar and videomaker, it disturbs me that the theory I respect and use is often at odds with the media I make and watch. This essay attempts to reconcile the contradictions between my practical experience as teacher, maker, spectator and scholar of political documentary by women and the critical and theoretical knowledge I have amassed in my academic work. Must I feel embarrassed, stupid or apologetic for liking and using these formal strategies? Why did many of the intelligent, highly-educated, political women who invented feminist film theory simplify, and then disown, these complex films? I do not want to suggest that this occurred as some evil, poststructuralist, feminist conspiracy but rather as the result of particular economic, intellectual, historical, personal and political motivations, including the translation of high French theory into English and the need to legitimize and authorize the highly suspect work of feminist interpretation and the deeply troubling fact of feminist scholars in the academy. In the service of such understandable ends, feminist film critics misread or simplified a body of film practice to make other legitimate points, loosely applied sets of terms from a variety of disciplines to a political documentary practice founded upon other schools of political theory, and thus most certainly used an inadequate theoretical lens to interpret what such films actually *do* accomplish.

Thus, in this article, I attempt to retrieve seventies realist feminist documentaries from their devalued position in feminist film history by looking more closely at what these films did accomplish and by using other theoretical grids, beyond feminist film theory, to do so. This is not to suggest that the antirealist position was without any warrant whatsoever; nor is it to deny that we have learned from this critique. For, in fact, many current feminist documentaries about AIDS use 'realist' styles in highly self-conscious, even self-critical ways (although some do not) which are indebted to the feminist theoretical legacy of the past fifteen years. Yet even as I hope to note the 'deconstructive' uses of realist style, I will continue to emphasize that more conventional uses of these forms are not without importance, sophistication, or effect.

In fact, I am arguing several (sometimes contradictory) positions about the use of realist style in the service of feminist political film or videomaking. First, that a careful look at the formal strategies of many of the feminist 'realist' documentaries of the seventies, eighties and nineties allows us to see what many earlier critics missed: that there is contradiction, antirealism, many realisms within specific 'realist' texts. But second, that even the most 'naively realist' moments within such films can function in ways more viable than many criticisms of realism have allowed for. And third, the reason for this is the political efficacy of realism (the power to convince, document, move to anger and action, and the ability to take control

of identity and identification within systems of representation so as to move towards personal and collective action). So, even as the problems with realist form which were identified by antirealist critics remain valid, I believe that when makers and viewers are moved to use film or video as part of a political project, the benefits are often evaluated as strategically more important than the limits of such form.

This, in turn, serves my more selfish ends of understanding and affirming recent political documentary work by feminists (including myself), specifically the vast numbers of alternative AIDS videos by women, which continue to rely upon 'realist' strategies to accomplish their political goals of ending or altering the course of the AIDS crisis for the real women and men who daily suffer because of it. While I understand how the feminist documentaries of the early women's movement and those of the second decade of the AIDS epidemic remain distinct (in their intended audience, formats, and understandings of political action and representational politics) I am most interested in their shared reliance upon realist strategy, even as a decade of critical theory advises against it. In this article, I will first look at realist political documentaries from the seventies and will conclude with a discussion of my own AIDS video production. I will be attempting to understand both what the antirealist position missed and how it then also contributed to a critical vocabulary which has pushed many makers and viewers of realist documentaries in the nineties towards a more noticeably self-aware theoretical/political practice.

A demonstration of contradictions II

'Hi, I'm Cathy Elaine Davies, a patient here at Woodhull Hospital. I'd like to inform you on safer sex.' A young black woman faces the camera with a blackboard behind her. She draws a picture of a woman's vulva, highlighting the vaginal opening and the clitoris ('the man in the boat'). She then cuts a condom open, and places the sheet of latex over her drawing. 'I'm sure you wouldn't want anything to happen to yourself, or the person you're with. That's why you must always use one of these: a dental dam.'

HIV TV (The VIP Video Group, 1991).

The sort of direct mode of address in both films [*Janie's Janie* and *Joyce at 34*] encourages us to relate to the images of Joyce and Janie as 'real' women, as if we could know them. Yet, in fact, both figures are constructed in the film processes of camera, lighting, sound, editing. They can have no other ontological

existence for the spectator than that of representation
Underlying all of the above is the key notion of the unified self which characterizes pre-semiological thought. Both Joyce and Janie, as subjects, are seen in the autobiographical mode, as having essences that have persisted through time and that reveal growth through individual change outside of influence from social structures, economic relations, or psychoanalytical laws.

E. Ann Kaplan, 'The realist debate in the feminist film', p. 128.

A little feminist film history

The unity, discovery, energy, and brave we're-here-to-stay spirit of the early days underwent a definite shift in 1975, mid-decade Overall, there is a growing acceptance of feminist film as an area of study rather than as a field of action. And this may pull feminist film work away from its early political commitment, encompassing a wide social setting; away from issues of life that go beyond form; away from the combative (as an analysis of and weapon against patriarchal capitalism) into the merely representational.

B. Ruby Rich, 'In the name of feminist film theory', p. 343.

While I do not wish to simplify the specific conditions of the writing of early feminist film theory by a diverse group of women, there do seem to be certain historical, political and theoretical imperatives that may explain their shared simplification of feminist documentaries. Feminist film theory was born out of a unique historical and intellectual conjuncture during which women began to gain a foothold in the US academy, while the newly translated-into-English theories of the mostly male French poststructuralists, semiologists, and psychoanalysts were also gaining a foothold there. Meanwhile, work by feminist critics from Britain and France which focused upon this theory was itself providing a legitimizing discourse for US scholars. Thus, before Kaplan critiques *Janie's Janie* (Geri Ashur and Peter Barton, 1970–71), she devotes six pages to 'the theoretical sources for such arguments', schematically citing the work of Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Metz, Barthes, Kristeva and Althusser.¹³ In their introductory chapter to a 1984 collection of foundational essays on feminist film theory, Doane, Mellencamp and Williams look back thirteen years to construct a brief, teleological history of feminism and film. They describe a transition from 'film festivals which were an integral part of the activism and consciousness-raising of the women's movement' to 'the introduction of new critical theories and methodologies of semiology and psychoanalysis by British feminists; and finally, the rise of feminist film criticism as an academic field that has already begun to

¹³ Kaplan, 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', pp. 79–80.

14 Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, *ReVision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1984), p. 4.

15 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989), p. xii.

16 See, for example, *Camera Obscura*, vol. 3, no. 4. In 'Chronology', written by The Camera Obscura Collective in this 1979 issue, the group documents their intellectual history from the founding of the first feminist film journal, *Women and Film*, in 1973 to the present in 1979. The Collective explains that their intellectual shifts dealigned them from 'radical feminism, the major tendency among American feminists at the time', since most US feminists were against 'theoretical work', meaning the writings of Marx and Freud.

17 Manohla Dargis and Amy Taubin, 'Double take', *The Village Voice*, 21 January, 1992, p. 56.

18 Doane, Mellencamp and Williams, *ReVision*, pp. 7-8.

produce a generation of feminist film scholars.¹⁴ They are quick to bemoan a 'loss of activism', but they treat this as a natural progression rather than the result of strategic professional and political choices. Laura Mulvey explains: 'In terms of my own history, I sometimes feel that the excitement, novelty and sheer difficulty of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory overwhelmed other political concerns and commitments.'¹⁵

Beyond the 'excitement, novelty, and sheer difficulty' of the new theories under investigation at this time, a critique of 'other political concerns and commitments' was often waged by academic feminists who began to find the women's movement to be essentialist, and in other ways simple.¹⁶ The word 'naive' regularly accompanied the critique of feminist documentaries that recorded real women talking about their lives and issues in real time. 'Naive' means: if they knew better they wouldn't do this. The 'they' here is most often people of colour, poor people, less-educated people, some women: 'they' use realism naively. The critique of 'their' works has often come from well-educated, upper-middle-class scholars, often women, who usually identify themselves as political. Dargis wonders, 'why does it seem like the criticism lobbed at documentaries such as those on tap at the Whitney was not only too harsh, but suspiciously self-interested? Could it be that once these messy, activist, and earnest works were banished to the dustbin, attention would be paid to the sort of filmmaking that neatly mirrored the same concerns of a certain emerging, academic feminism?'¹⁷ There is absolutely nothing that is *naive* about rejecting films that do not replicate a theoretical position:

Earlier US feminist documentaries – *Growing Up Female*, *Janie's Janie*, *The Woman's Film*, and *Antonia, Portrait of a Woman* – had aimed at creating more truthful, unstereotyped images of women in their particular social, racial and class contexts Yet the British feminists criticized them on the basis of their acceptance of realistic documentary modes of representation associated with patriarchy. This theoretical work was also buttressed by a growing number of feminist avant-garde films which explicitly dealt with issues of representation, language, voyeurism, desire and the image – e.g. *Riddles of the Sphinx*, and more recently, *Thriller* and *Sigmund Freud's Dora*.¹⁸

Well before, during and after the creation of a feminist avant-garde film tradition in the seventies, there was a long and rich tradition of a 'naive', window-on-the-world type of political documentary production which includes much of the work of the Third Cinema, the identity film and video movements of women, people of colour, and gays in the seventies, and a good deal of current ethnographic media production. Importantly, much of this so called realist film and video practice is and was theoretically informed in the

traditional, academic sense: not at all naive. For example, theories of de- and postcolonialism, and much current writing about identity politics, support the complexity of utilizing realist codes towards the construction of identities in cultures where some individuals and communities continue to be invisible, voiceless, and misrepresented for political ends.

Thus my aim here is not so much to challenge the theory upon which the antirealist critique was built (I am trained in, and use, this theory), nor am I contesting the practical efficacy of gaining positions within primarily male institutions by using the master's tools with and against him (I owe my academic position to this legacy). Rather, I am attempting to find what was lost along the way. Most certainly, subtle and supportive critical attention was denied an immensely important body of film by women, largely I think, because one current theoretical grid was held up against a body of film work which was itself based upon another set of theoretical principles. Kaplan, Johnston, McGarry, et al. did not invent the realist critique that they applied to feminist documentaries (although they certainly improved it by integrating gender into the mix),¹⁹ rather they privileged this discourse over another contemporaneous constellation of theories (those of the second-wave US women's movement for example.) B. Ruby Rich delineates what was actually a split in feminist film theory during its formative period: the US, 'so-called sociological, approach' and the 'originally British, so-called theoretical, approach'. Against the now institutionalized voices of theorists like Johnston, Cook and Mulvey she cites another feminist theoretical tradition embodied in the work of US feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly.²⁰

Using 'sociological' theory as one's guide, many of the naively realist documentaries of the seventies take on a sophistication and a self-awareness typically denied them. For example *Janie's Janie*, the subject of a great deal of academic feminist realism bashing, actually utilizes a range of documentary techniques, some more 'realist' than others. The film documents the coming-into-consciousness of a working-class, single mother, who, by the film's end, has joined a group for welfare mothers fighting for better education for poor children, and childcare for working mothers. It is true that a direct-cinema camera documents images of Janie at home in grainy and shaky black-and-white; the camera sloppily zooms to catch her making sandwiches or cleaning the living room. We are allowed to see, as it 'really' happens, her housework, the demands of her children, her poverty. However, a good deal of the images of Janie's 'real' life in her busy and loud household capture her being interviewed, which is nothing like her real life (and nothing like the 'verite' style claimed to define this film). As she takes care of her 'real' tasks at home, she also answers questions about the pain she experienced when she lived with her husband and before that with

19 Stuart Hall writes: 'Is it true that ideologies work exclusively by their forms? This position depends on an anti-realist aesthetic – a fashionable position in debates about ideology in the early 1970s It represented at the time a certain justified "formalist" reaction to the over-preoccupation with "content" and "realism" on the traditional left. But it was and is open to very serious criticism. For one thing it was founded on a rather loony and quite ahistorical view of the narrative and presentation forms in television. They were said *all* to belong to the same type of "realism" – the realism of the realist text, was the phrase – which, apparently, was introduced in the fourteenth century and had persisted, more or less, right up to *Man Alive*.' 'The whites of their eyes', in Manuel Alvarado and John Thompson (eds), *The Media Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), p. 21.

20 B. Ruby Rich, 'In the name of feminist film theory', in *Movies and Methods: Volume II*, Bill Nichols (ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 349–50.

her father, and about how she fought and beat the electric company when it tried to turn off her service. Distinct from these two sorts of sequences are the dramatically-lit, direct-address statements which she makes about her life while sitting alone in her kitchen. Midway through the film there occurs an arty sequence which metaphorically depicts Janie's growth into a feminist consciousness. Staged images of Janie looking into a mirror and washing dishes (shot from outside the house through a grimy window) are set, proto-MTV style, to folksy women's music. Later the camera follows Janie to a political meeting, and then out into the world, as she informs us in a voiceover about the many issues for which she, and other women, still need to fight.

The filmmakers use a range of documentary techniques to record specific tensions within, and interpretations of, Janie's identity and reality. Yet, this is not so much to convince the audience that Janie is a real woman ('the direct mode of address . . . encourages us to relate to the images of Joyce and Janie as "real" women, as if we could know them')²¹ as to make what was at the time a current and radical political argument concerning women's self-discovery as a route towards feminist *collective identity* and political action. In 1970, Barbara Susan wrote about consciousness raising as a radical political theory:

Consciousness raising is a way of forming a political analysis on information we can trust is true. That information is our experience. It is difficult to understand how our oppression is political (organized) unless we first remove it from the area of personal problems. Unless we talk to each other about and see how many of our problems are shared by other people, we won't be able to see how problems are rooted in politics.²²

Coming directly out of this political philosophy, *Janie's Janie* makes use of the camera in a manner similar to the structure of a consciousness-raising group: by articulating and sharing in public her personal history and experience *on film*, she works to construct a political critique regarding the status of all women. This is marked formally by the transition from Janie's single, isolated image recorded alone in the domestic sphere, to her communal political action in the outside world: a move discussed and performed by many women in and out of representation during this period. For example, Lynn O'Conner writes about women's experiences in consciousness raising: 'She begins to understand that the process of consciousness raising is in fact a process that probably has no end, that she may now understand the need for collective revolutionary solutions, but her own consciousness is still on the move and she knows not where it will end.'²³ Only after speaking *to the camera*, about her past, her relationships to men, her lack of job training, and the racism which was bred in her by her family, school and

²¹ Kaplan, 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', p. 87.

²² Barbara Susan, 'About my consciousness raising', in Leslie Tanner (ed.), *Voices From Women's Liberation* (New York: Signet Books, 1970), p. 242.

²³ Lynn O'Conner quoted in 'A broom of one's own: notes on the women's liberation program', in Joan Cooke, Charlotte Bunch-Weeks, and Robin Morgan (eds), *The New Women* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1970), pp. 189–90.

neighbourhood, does Janie recognize her need to interact with other poor women with needs similar to her own, regardless of their race.

'It was an act of previously unarticulated knowledge', writes Julia Lesage in 1978 about the feminist documentary film of the seventies, 'of seeing that knowledge as political (i.e. as a way of beginning to change power relations), and of understanding the power of this knowledge was that it was arrived at collectively'.²⁴ The making of this film provides the forum for Janie's 'previously unarticulated knowledge'; it propels Janie's individual experience into the realm of the collective. The film doesn't document Janie's fixed and unproblematic identity so much as it documents Janie's identity-in-process, her coming into a politicized identity and the making of a political woman through the focus upon identity allowed by cinematic realism. So intent were some film theorists upon inventing a new, more liberatory, filmic language that it seems that this very cinematic realism – a term which in their usage loosely encompasses the variety of formal techniques used in *Janie's Janie* and films like it – blinded them to what else occurred in the film (its class and gender-based analysis, its critique of the fixed identity of the isolated housewife). Thus Kaplan can argue that simply because Janie is depicted in a realist 'autobiographical mode', she is necessarily seen in the manner of all realist films – having an essence that has 'persisted through time and whose personal growth or change is autonomous, outside the influence of social structure, economic relations, or psychoanalytical law'²⁵ – even as Janie articulates a politicized critique in these same talking-head interviews.

The reliance upon talking-head style of many early feminist documentaries has also inspired a great deal of harsh criticism. Yet, in retrospect, Amy Taubin insists that a primary lesson of seventies documentaries is that 'the way to insure marginalized people a place in history is to record their stories on film'.²⁶ Realist codes and talking-head conventions are most typically used to do the political work of entering new opinions, new subjectivities, or newly-understood identities, into public discourse. Thus, *It Happens to Us* (Amalie Rothschild, 1972) compiles testimony of women who have had abortions by primarily utilizing a talking-head interview technique. We see women addressing an interviewer or the camera and speaking out loud their gruesome, undocumented, private experiences with illegal abortions. The interviews of a diverse group of women are edited thematically. Although the individual stories of the women are compelling and unique, the power of the film is not in its conventional realist function of confirming these women's realities or identities as fixed or complete – in inspiring identification with individual women – but documenting the reality of a collective, gendered oppression. Words that have rarely been said by women out loud form a revisionist history that unifies a *range of positions* as

24 Lesage, 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary', p. 515.

25 Kaplan, 'Theories and strategies of the feminist documentary', p. 87.

26 Dargis and Taubin, 'Double take' p. 56.

one potential for a shared feminist identity and the political action that this collective articulation of oppression will inspire.

Similarly, films like *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum* (Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976) and *Birth Film* (Susan Kleckner, 1972) enter 'private' images of women's bodies into the public domain: we see a closeup of a mother giving a gynaecological exam to her daughter; we see a closeup of a woman's vagina as she gives birth to a child. The female genitals are shot in such extreme closeup that we lose sight of the 'real' woman attached to them. Instead, these images provide visual evidence towards the contemporaneous political critique of the healthcare system and the social construction of women's sexuality. In an article written in 1971 about the politics of women's sexuality, Alix Shulman explains, 'now that women, the only real experts on female sexuality, are beginning to talk together and share notes, they are discovering their experiences are remarkably similar and that they are not freaks. In the process of exposing the myths and lies, women are discovering that it is not they who have individual sex problems: it is society that has one great big political problem.'²⁷

According to Taubin, seventies feminist documentaries are defined by 'a realpolitik rather than the politics of representation'.²⁸ But this realpolitik is based upon a politics of representation, although not one directly indebted to semiotics or psychoanalysis. Rather, feminist realist documentaries focus attention on the *condition of constructing collective identity through representation*. A large number of these documentaries include self-referential footage which records the delight and power felt by women learning to use film and audio equipment. In *The Woman's Film* (Woman's Caucus of San Francisco Newsreel, 1971) images of women with cameras and nagra sound recorders accompany the voices of women in a consciousness-raising group who are discussing the importance of women taking control of technology. As with the political strategy of consciousness raising, these films do not attempt to confirm the stability or unity of identity, but rather its flexibility and the potential political power of individuals connecting through systems of discourse which allow for the recognition of the relatedness of their identities and hence the possibility for collective action.

Thus, what may seem to be an irreconcilable split between competing feminist theories founded upon either second-wave feminist consciousness raising (as evidenced in much of the period's documentary film production) or adaptations of ideological analysis (as evidenced in the feminist film critique of these films) is instead a more subtle contradiction in beliefs about the political efficacy of reality and identity. Both of these schools of feminist film theory and practice agree that the identities that are created for women by bourgeois, patriarchal ideology are dangerous and oppressive. They also share the belief that neither identity nor reality are essential or

²⁷ Alix Shulman, 'Organs and orgasms', in Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran (eds), *Woman in Sexist Society* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1971), p. 301.

²⁸ Dargis and Taubin, 'Double take', p. 56.

fixed, but rather that they are constructed by patriarchal culture. Yet academic feminists of the period seemed to argue that a dismantling of identity is the viable response to these conditions, while most feminist documentarians utilized the strategic construction of identity as their first step. 'Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality',²⁹ writes Johnston. I agree, and suggest that realist images of women discussing their lived experience is one strategy with which to initiate this challenge.

A demonstration of contradictions III

During the Spring semester of 1992 I taught a course at Swarthmore College called 'Women and Documentary'. The final class of a section devoted to women's documentary practice in the seventies focused upon the talking-head history film. We viewed *Union Maids* (Julia Reichert, James Klein and Miles Mogulescu, 1975), having read a great deal of contemporaneous feminist film theory in the preceding weeks. As we discussed why feminists had criticized these less-than-formally-innovative films, two comments seemed particularly demonstrative of the sentiment in the classroom. One student explained that whenever she found herself *liking* the film, getting wrapped up in the words or struggles of the women speaking on the screen, she would think of me so as to remember why I would say this wasn't a 'good' film. After screening *Union Maids*, another student sheepishly asked: 'Remind me why we're not supposed to like identification?'

The psychoanalytically informed film criticism following Mulvey's original attack on the visual pleasure of narrative cinema is still marked by a suspicion of any kind of feminine role model, heroine or image of identification . . . 'Identification' itself has been seen as a cultural process complicit with the reproduction of dominant culture by reinforcing patriarchal forms of identity. Jackie Stacey. 'Feminine fascinations: forms of identification in star-audience relations', p. 147.

Discussing *Union Maids*, my students say that they enjoy hearing smart, brave, political women recounting their lives. Feminist film theory be damned, young feminists need role models. They are moved by the images of beautiful, smart, political and articulate women on the TV screen. Realism-schemealism; we are almost entirely denied this privilege in our culture. In a review of a Whitney Museum series highlighting the documentaries of the women's movement, Manohla Dargis and Amy Taubin have a similar reaction: 'After a decade of Phil and Oprah and Sally, it was

startling to hear and see women give witness, but not in the degraded language of talk TV'.

Making identity in alternative AIDS media by women

It seems useful at this point to make a general distinction between the use of talking heads to represent some official and authoritative position, and the use of talking heads of people who are telling their own stories.

Barbara Halpern Martineau, 'Talking about our lives and experiences: some thoughts about feminism, documentary and "talking heads"', p. 259.

As she critiques realist documentaries, Claire Johnston claims that 'it is idealist mystification to believe that "truth" can be captured by the camera'.³⁰ The use of the term 'mystification' seems misplaced here: it is an elitist mystification to believe that non-academics believe that 'truth' is the only thing captured by cameras. In my work producing alternative AIDS video with collectives of women who are affected by the crisis (working-class, minority women from Brooklyn in *We Care*; poor, HIV-positive men and women from Brooklyn in *HIV TV*; privileged college undergraduates for *Safer and Sexier: A College Student's Guide to Safer Sex*) I have seen again and again that activist videomakers are doing something quite different than capturing truth with their camcorders. AIDS documentaries which focus upon the real words and experiences of real women attempt to make with video a *better vision* of that individual's reality as well as to contribute towards a better reality for the intended viewer.³¹ Political women need to make and watch videos to hear and see themselves speak: a condition unavailable for many of them in the 'real' world. Women in AIDS videos like *We Care* and *HIV TV*, are not experts in the 'real' world; Marie and Cathy do not get the time and privilege to define themselves publicly in the 'real' world; they do not communicate effortlessly across divisions of class, race and geography. Thus, a large number of alternative tapes about AIDS by women document, celebrate and affirm, in the dreaded 'autobiographical mode', the words and experiences of the maker and those who then identify with her: 'Hi, I'm Marie, welcome to my home'. 'I'm Cathy Elaine Davies. I'm a patient here at Woodhull. I'd like to inform you on safer sex.' While Kaplan worries that we will be duped by the 'unified self which characterizes pre-semineological thought', those of us making feminist documentaries are deciding the best way to be ourselves *for the camera*, for the scene, for the particular video with its particular purposes. We ask questions like: 'Should I sound familiar, or like an expert?' 'Did I say that right?' 'Could you shoot that again?'

In feminist documentaries such as *Union Maids*, *Janie's Janie*, *We*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³¹ A similar project is seen in the Soviet constructivist documentaries of Esther Shub and Dziga Vertov. See Annette Michelson (ed.), *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Vlada Petric, 'Esther Shub: cinema is my life', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1978) pp. 430-56.

Care, and *HIV TV*, codes of realism *are* used, and identification is intended to occur between maker, subject and viewer. Yet, even as a woman speaks as herself on camera, or even as a viewer identifies with her, these makers, subjects, and spectators are perfectly aware of the videotape mediating between the women watching in the world and the women represented to them through discourse. If you have ever shot a video or been interviewed, you know that using a camera is not an innocent act. You become aware of the power there; you become aware of how the camera affects an interaction. The videotape left over after an event or a moment is not simply that moment; not as complete, not as rich, not as thorough as your real experience. It's something else – something powerful too – something like a video. If you have ever edited you know this with an irrefutable certainty, as you move an image of a moment next to an image of another moment that was not next to it in reality, as you pull a good sentence out of a muddled paragraph, as you make yourself more articulate by dropping the 'ums' and 'ands.' You have made something there. If what you have shot is a person, perhaps yourself, then you *know*, no naivete here, that the act of making a video is a work of self-production. By working with and through forms of representation like video, identity and meaning are made. This is precisely what the feminist–realist debate said we *did not* know. But how could one not recognize that it is the self-conscious telling of oneself and one's ideas, to a camera and through an editing machine, that makes the self that one becomes on video? It is a privilege, as a woman, and as a political woman, and as a culturally disenfranchised woman, to get to do this: we are so rarely allowed to work on, and then present our selves as we hope to be seen.

To make an image of little-represented identities is just that: making *images*. The point is not that by shooting a video you lock yourself, your identity, into one place, but rather that you work on it, that you are self-consciously aware that there needs to be an identity there. A steady shot of a woman does not necessarily fix her with an essential identity, especially if she is discussing (or depicting) in front of the camera her own ambiguity about her identity. Since so much of feminist and other 'identity' video movements are specifically about *constructing* our own identities in a society that has usually done this for minorities, much of the 'realist' footage in minority-produced productions ends up recording people reflexively discussing the meaning, reinterpretation and importance of their own identity.

If the construction of identity is so clear to the women who make political documentary, is it equally evident to those who watch it? If the work of film production highlights the act of identity construction for the maker, is this readily available to the viewer? Does the powerful draw and pleasure of identification, as defined by

³² Interestingly enough such feminist reinterpretations of earlier film theory have been focused for at least the past ten years on the 'women's film' and other popular texts. As scholars try to understand how women can watch mainstream cinema and television without being duped and without being considered stupid, they have had to expand and alter feminist interpretations of identification and negotiation. Perhaps because of a profession-wide disappearance of studies of both documentary and the avant garde, this feminist critique has remained almost entirely in the domain of mainstream culture.

³³ Jackie Stacey, 'Feminine fascinations: forms of identification in star-audience relations' in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 160.

³⁴ Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 127.

feminist film theory, deplete the realist image of its self-aware identity production? Certainly we 'identify' with the aspects of women's experiences which sound and look like our own, but we also emulate traits and experiences which are different from our own, and we discard the stuff we do not like or understand. In a recent article about women's fascination with female stars, Jackie Stacey attempts to expand the earlier, psychoanalytic, feminist theoretical understandings of identification so that she can understand a range of processes described by female fans about their relations to the stars.³² She found that women's recollections about their favourite stars invariably brought forth discussion of a variety of processes of identification, only some of these filling the rigid feminist, psychoanalytic mould.³³

The work of defining who we are in relation to AIDS is encouraged by realist images of real women. Our identity in relation to AIDS is not stable and final, so we produce new and useful identities in relation to what we see on the screen. We appreciate that these women-on-tape tell us facts we need to know, while at the same time modelling images of proud, powerful and dedicated black, female, HIV-positive women. Because the women who watch and make political documentary share beliefs, feminist positions or a political agenda, viewers use their identification with women on the screen as do women in consciousness-raising groups: not to form a complete sense of self, but to cross through individual identity so as to unify a collective, ideological agenda.

Thus, I believe that the worry that many feminist film critics communicated in the realist debates that in such films 'the filmic processes leave us with no work to do, so that we sit passively and receive the message',³⁴ is short-sighted. First, it is condescending to the feminist spectator who has a real stake in interpreting and evaluating the rare representations of her beliefs and 'identity'; it is not only feminist film scholars who question and challenge representation. And there are many formal and thematic elements within even a realist, talking-head video that refer to the act of representation; that call attention to video as video; that remind the viewer that realist representation is not necessarily transparent. Direct address is one such element. When Marie talks to us, she calls attention to the power of the video camera: it lets her show her house to people who will never be there and lets her pass information beyond the spaces and places she travels in her life as an AIDS educator. Voices offscreen talking to the talking head (for example when a group member offcamera prompts Cathy with the term 'dental dam'), remind the viewer that there is a space on the other side of the camera. The comfort which resonates between subject and maker in many AIDS videos is palpable to the viewer. It reminds us that there is a process and interaction involved in taping: Marie lets this camera into her home; that must be someone

³⁵ Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter cinema', p. 214.

³⁶ Stacey, 'Feminine fascination', p. 160.

³⁷ Fernando Birri, 'Cinema and underdevelopment', in *Twenty-five Years of New Latin American Cinema*, Michael Channan (ed.), (Indiana: British Film Institute, 1983), p. 12.

³⁸ Gledhill, p. 389.

she likes or knows behind the camera; Cathy is acting comfortably, even in relation to articulating these difficult and personal topics.

Johnston's projection that 'a cinema of non-intervention . . . promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis'³⁵ also overgeneralizes filmic spectatorship, as if all viewing situations are the same. Recent ethnographic approaches to spectatorship have stressed that we view *in context*. For instance, viewers of alternative, political films do not watch them as they would Hollywood films, *even* when the form of the films is similar, because the screening of such films usually occurs in intimate gatherings where discussion subsequently focuses response. Somehow, in the flurry to disavow the talking head, realism and identification in the service of understanding and critiquing mechanisms of signification, feminist scholars stopped thinking critically about the complex and intelligent ways that many people watch and make realist film and video. Stacey finds that female spectators describe multiple and complex processes of identification: 'the research also challenges the assumption that identification is necessarily problematic because it offers the spectator the illusory pleasure of unified subjectivity. The identifications represented in these letters speak as much about partial recognitions and fragmented replications as they do about the misrecognition of a unified subjectivity in an ego ideal on the screen.'³⁶ Finally, the feminist realist debate missed the most critical point of all: the impact and power of these films and videos comes more from their *use* than from their *form*. These films are first, but not merely, forms of political action.

They said we were trying to show reality. All I want to show is my video.

The theoretically sophisticated directors of the Third Cinema voiced a similar defence of the production of reality-based films for the political movements of the underdeveloped world. Film theorist and maker Fernando Birri writes: 'by testifying critically to this reality, to this sub-reality, to this misery, cinema refuses it. It rejects it. It denounces, judges, criticizes and deconstructs it.'³⁷ Birri's simultaneous use of 'reality' and 'deconstructs' points to an understanding of real-world conditions which are formed in, but are not reducible to, discourse. Gledhill, after questioning 'reality' and 'realism' for most of her article about developments in feminist film theory, concedes that when considering feminist documentaries as *political* tools, the theory itself must change as well: 'if a radical ideology, such as feminism, is to be defined as a means of providing a framework for political action, one must finally put one's finger on the scales, enter some kind of realist epistemology'.³⁸

This tension between theory and practice seems most tense for theorists. People making political art are more than capable of simultaneously understanding that while reality is constructed

through discourse, it is also lived in ways that need to change for many individuals. James Meyer recognizes how this tension is resolved in AIDS activist art. In his article, 'AIDS and postmodernism', he argues that both postmodern and realist techniques are used as a 'double strategy', 'at once critical and presentational' in activist AIDS video production.³⁹ Producers of alternative AIDS video need to root their activist position in the claim of a strategic identity shared by others (caregivers; black, gay, male PWAs; members of ACT UP), while at the same time working towards a society more flexible in how it uses identity to label and control people. Thus, Meyer identifies a strange blend of 'avant-gardist criticality versus essentialist instrumentality'⁴⁰ in AIDS activist art production.

The recent writings of feminist, ethnic and gay cultural theorists invoke a similar understanding of identity: it is always constructed, it is neither fixed nor essential, but it needs to be present nevertheless. Cornel West suggests that while postmodern theory has made central the concerns of difference and otherness, there has been little focus on how considerations of the nonessential nature of identity can itself be used politically.⁴¹ People who are oppressed because of their identities, essential or culturally constructed, do not have the luxury of celebrating the end of identity. However, they do have the power to first define for themselves, and then unify around identities which are ever-adaptable and contextually useful. bell hooks invokes this position when she discusses 'radical postmodernism' which 'would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups':⁴²

We return to 'identity' and 'culture' for relocation, linked to political practice – identity that is not informed by a narrow cultural nationalism masking continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic order. Instead identity is evoked as a stage in a process wherein one constructs radical black subjectivity.⁴³

The making and watching of alternative AIDS video provides a space in culture where political women with limited access to cultural production can partake in 'radical postmodernism'. Using video, women affected by AIDS can begin to invent, articulate and debate who they are, what they know and what they could be. For the women in the AIDS community, the political instance of access to media production allows us to speak our needs, define our agenda, counter irresponsible depictions of our lives, and recognize our similarities and differences. Cathy, who was a sex worker, and is a recovering IV drug user, who lives in Woodhull hospital in Brooklyn and is HIV-positive, gets the authority of being treated as an expert. Marie, an HIV-positive, middle-aged black woman, is allowed the affirmation of the camera and the television screen, as

³⁹ James Meyer, 'AIDS and postmodernism', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 66, no. 8 (1992), p.65.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴¹ Cornel West, 'Black culture and postmodernism' in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (eds), *Remaking History* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), p. 92.

⁴² bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

she takes her image to workshops and conferences. The spectator gets the pleasure and privilege of seeing ideas, communities and information that are rarely represented. There is pride to be gained from making a work that is important and useful to others. There is pleasure to be gained from seeing and being one's self. These are some of the many real prides and pleasures allowed by realism and identification when utilized as feminist strategies within politically motivated documentaries.

Solanas, Meyer, West, hooks and myself all refer to cultural production at once directly political and also theoretically complex. Too much criticism has sought to sever these agendas that many of us find perfectly compatible: the attempt to represent in order to contribute towards change in real-world, lived conditions as well as at the same time offering a critique of the notion of the unified, gendered, classed, raced subject who can be unproblematically represented and oppressed within that 'reality'. Although I would not want to suggest that all political documentaries struggle within both of these realms with equal skill, self-awareness or energy, I am trying to suggest that feminist, realist documentary – especially that motivated by political struggles which are focused upon the consequences of identity and community in a bigoted society – will position itself in both form and content, in some relation to reality, and more often than not this is a position of criticality, theoretical sophistication, and practical efficacy.

My thanks to the many friends and colleagues who read, discussed and inspired this paper – especially Erin Cramer, Betsy Bolton, Alisa Lebow and Scott Bukatman for their close and careful readings of many drafts. It seems many of us 'Third Wavers' are trying to reevaluate and retrace our recent, yet often hidden, feminist theoretical past.

The Whitney Museum programme included: *Three Lives*, Women's Liberation Cinema Company, 1970; *The Woman's Film*, Woman's Caucus of San Francisco Newsreel, 1971; *Women's Lib*, People's Video Theater, 1970; *The Politics of Intimacy*, Julie Gustafson, 1972-3; *Another Look*, Women's Video News Service, 1972; *The Fifth Street Women's Building Film*, Janus Lurie, 1971; *Healthcaring: From Our End of the Speculum*, Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, 1976; *It Happens to Us*, Amalie Rothschild, 1972; *Birth Film*, Susan Kleckner, 1972; *Growing Up Female*, Julia Reichert and James Klein, 1971; *Fifty Wonderful Years*, Optic Nerve, 1973; *Nun and Deviant*, Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton, 1976; *Makeout*, New York Newsreel, 1972; *Not A Pretty Picture*, Martha Coolidge, 1975; *Nana, Mom and Me*, Amalie Rothschild, 1974; *Ama l'uomo tuo*, Cara de Vito, 1974; *Daughter-Rite*, Michelle Citron, 1978; *The Emerging Woman*, Women's Film Project, 1974; *Antonia: Portrait of the Woman*, Judy Collins and Jill Godmilow, 1974; *Union Maids*, Julia Reichert, James Klein and Miles Mogulescu, 1975; *Janie's Janie*, Geri Ashur and Peter Barton, 1970-71; *Harriet*, Nancy Cain, 1973; *Chris and Bernie*, Deborah Shaffer and Bonnie Friedman, 1975; *In the Best Interests of the Children*, Iris Film Collective, 1977; *Dyketicatics*, Barbara Hammer, 1974; *The Amazon Festival*, Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective, 1973-7. See Programme Notes: Lucinda Furlong, 'From object to subject', The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1992. More films are listed in Julia Lesage's 'The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1978, including: *Three Lives*, Kate Millet; *Joyce at 34*, Joyce Chopra; *Woman to Woman*, Donna Deitch; *The Flashettes*, Bonnie Friedman; *Parthenogenesis*, Michelle Citron; *Like A Rose*, Tomato Productions; *We're Alive*, California Institute for Women Video; *Self Health*, San Francisco Women's Health Collective; *Taking Our Bodies Back*, Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich and Joan Fink; *The Chicago Maternity Center Story*, Kartmquin Films. Most of these films are very difficult, if not impossible, to find. They were often distributed by the maker; the distributors who handled many of these films are long out of business.

39th International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen, 22–28 April 1993

The Oberhausen Short Film Festival has a rich tradition and is probably the most important German film festival other than Berlin. Oberhausen is a city in which one would least expect such a cultural event; it is situated in the Ruhr, a classic industrial region shaped by coalmining and steelmaking, and the appearance of the town is dominated by the typical, somewhat faceless architecture of postwar Germany. The well-known openness and responsiveness of the Short Film Festival are undoubtedly influenced by this environment. Even if the spirit of revolt in German filmmaking of the sixties disappeared long ago, the atmosphere is still pleasantly relaxed and leaves room for new and unknown work.

It was always Oberhausen's claim that it promoted international contacts, not only in documentary and animation, but also in experimental film. For a long time the motto 'way to the neighbour' exemplified these efforts, whose focus was the countries of eastern Europe, long before this was opportune. By the seventies, at the time of the *Ostpolitik*, Oberhausen was already turning its attention to the North–South dialogue and, above all, to the Latin American countries. Meanwhile the 'neighbour', to whom paths are to be beaten, has become even less familiar despite becoming closer. The Federal Republic is confronted with increasing immigration from regions of crisis in the Third World and, as the events of recent years have shown, German society is proving increasingly incapable of coexisting with strangers. Worse still, the brutality with which 'asylum seekers' and 'foreigners' are treated as scapegoats for internal German problems seems to display

dangerous parallels with the pre-Nazi Germany of the twenties. For that reason, expectations of Oberhausen 93 were especially high and while the festival organizers escaped the pressures to a degree by avoiding direct political statements, they tried to respond to the political situation by making 'Confrontation of Cultures' the theme of the festival.

The most important part of the programme is the International Competition, in which this year seventy-six films were judged by an international jury. In addition there is a German Competition (with forty films), films on the festival theme, and extensive retrospectives – this year of work from the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune and from the National Film and Television Institute in Accra, Ghana.

The theme 'Confrontation of Cultures' covered films from the black cinema of the USA, Great Britain and the Caribbean since, as it states in the conference catalogue foreword, 'there, the debate, in direct confrontation with the dominant white and Western standard, has been taken furthest'. The lack of clarity in the organizers' own political position, though, and the decision to put these films in a separate showcase took their toll: although there were certainly a large number of really interesting films to be seen, everything ran simultaneously in a more or less isolated fashion and confrontation and debate were largely absent. A stronger link to the German situation would have been desirable. For example, films from countries like Turkey, from which there is emigration to Germany, could have been shown, or films by non-German filmmakers living here. The problems of racism in the USA or Great Britain are relatively remote from German reality; basically they are discussed by specialists and are not automatically transferable to the position of blacks in the Federal Republic. The showing of hip hop videos as part of the Conference theme was

especially unconvincing, since the actual social context and political significance of this African-American music culture are hardly accessible to the public here. Since hip hop is consumed as entertainment in Germany, these video showings seemed above all to be a fashionable flattery of a supposed pop phenomenon.

The debate which the 'Confrontation of Cultures' theme did not really set in motion nevertheless found sufficient space at this year's Short Film Festival. Around eighty per cent of the filmmakers were present and participated in the discussions following the programmes. Simultaneous interpreting ensured linguistic comprehension, yet it was interesting to observe again and again how little 'foreignness' could be overcome either through films or through discussions. The films from Japan, for example, which were all characterized by a debate with tradition and by generational and gender conflicts, had a very difficult time. While *Chigosugata Yūfū No Tsukis* (Tange, 1993) dealt very poetically with the eternal cycle of life and reproduction against the background of eighteenth-century Japanese culture, in the documentary *Kazoku Kechap* (Kudo Yoshihiro, 1992) a young man took issue with his family in a violent and provocative way. The principal target of his aggressive impulses was his mother, and during a kind of psychodynamic encounter scene he even urinates on her. Both these very different films met with similar reactions of rejection and interest – in the first instance, however, they produced an awareness of the almost unbridgeable gulf between West European and Far Eastern culture. Sometimes more was achieved through such experiences of strangeness than by the pursuit of common features, which all too often ends in a premature sense of familiarity. Coming to grips with the foreign first of all requires the recognition of difference.

By contrast the discussion after a programme in which two British films and

one Irish film were screened, produced an astonishing feeling of *deja vu*. The Irish film *The Visit* (Orla Walsh, 1992) dealt with the predicament of the wives of political prisoners in Northern Ireland, whose needs are completely eclipsed by the demands of the common struggle. They are expected to wait faithfully for their husbands for up to twenty years, and in the restricted conditions in which they have to live, social control by conservative Catholic society is very strict. The film attached great importance to documenting the situation in Belfast, the military presence and the constant threat of bloodshed. Asked about their attitude towards the conflict in Northern Ireland, the British film makers present responded with an awkwardness and sense of guilt familiar from German responses to inquiries about the contemporary significance of fascism. As informed leftwing intellectuals, they were well aware of the questionable nature of their lack of interest and information; they adopted the solution of a very positive attitude towards *The Visit*, and emphasized how important it was for the film to be shown. In this situation the German public was, on the one hand, reminded of its own unhealthy evasions but, on the other, it also became clear how greatly the explosiveness and the pain of the conflict in Northern Ireland is underestimated in Europe.

In the remainder of this report I will briefly discuss a few films shown in the International Competition. One of the high points of the Competition was the experimental film *Sleepy Haven* (Germany, 1993) by Matthias Müller, whose earlier films, *The Memo Book* (1989) and *Home Stories* (1990), have won many prizes and had already been shown at Oberhausen with considerable success. *Sleepy Haven* is distinguished by great aesthetic unity and an intense rhythm. Repeated movements, constantly fading in and fading out, are cut in such a way that a rolling flow develops; menace and melancholy change to a tearing

apart, followed by calm and distance again. The film is tinted blue-black, a colour range associated equally with coldness, remoteness and security. The tension of restless sleep, of dreams, of longing nocturnal secrets and the pleasure of the body, is embedded in images of the ocean, harbours and ships. They are followed by pictures of water, waterfalls, of ice and ice floes breaking apart, tossing waves again, tearing fabric, tearing ropes and moorings and at the end one again sees the great ship and the ocean. The film never becomes sentimental, however. It avoids this by the careful choice of picture material and the economy and the precision of the style.

Unlike the majority of the Competition films, whose soundtracks were agonizingly boring, using the same synthesiser sounds over and over again, in *Sleepy Haven* the sound is a distinct means of expression: silence alternates with music which swells and fades, with texts taken from Joseph Conrad, with a babel of voices, and with the most diverse 'real' sounds, especially of water.

The fascination of Igor Milenko's *Khmuroe Utro* (*Dull Morning*, [Ukraine 1992]) was of a quite different kind. The film uses elements from Ukrainian and Russian folk tales. Their allegorical character becomes obvious, but their significance remains puzzling to the western viewer. They are enclosed in an atmosphere of menace, which shifts from a kind of hyper-reality to the surreal and ends in a suspiciously verdant landscape. The first black-and-white section of the film is charged with the sinister, deadly atmosphere of a dilapidated farmhouse, while the conclusion is dominated by dreamlike green and blue. When in the final shot the camera pans up to a white-grey sky, the silhouette of a nuclear power station – very small, barely visible – becomes recognizable on the horizon. Using a poetic style, this film succeeds in conveying the terrors of the nuclear threat much more effectively than would have been possible with a more direct approach or with already well-known and worn-out documentary

images. The invisibility and unpredictability of a horrifying situation, the impossibility of relating cause and effect, the fact that the familiar world remains apparently intact – all these things which usually evade transferral to the screen – find an expression here.

Roy Andersson's *Nagonting Har Hänt* (*Something Happened*, [Sweden, 1987]) also deals with a lurking, intangible threat. None of the pictures and scenes with which the subject of AIDS are represented here have anything in common with the usual images in educational films or films about those directly affected by the condition. The most important facts about AIDS are explained by the offscreen commentary, but what is shown to accompany this subverts and exposes many of the assumptions which are conveyed by such texts. So, for example, the school teacher who is instructing the pupils how to use a condom is an old-maidish person, who has brought broom handle ends to practice on and who pulls the condom onto her own broom handle very tenderly. After the lesson she remains behind, alone in the classroom, an elderly man comes in and with a suggestive glance locks the door from the inside. Noteworthy in the film are the consistently bleak, colourless settings in which all the scenes take place, the omnipresence of beige, discoloured walls and brownish carpets, white blouses and shirts, the most tasteless furnishings, and clothing which hides body shape. All the people in the film look as if sex were something completely unimaginable to them, so that one is forced to ask oneself what on earth such characters have to do with education about AIDS. Is this conservative exterior merely a symptom of a need for control, or does the asexual appearance carry the same dangers and risks which are normally attributed to socially recognized 'sinners'? The film constantly holds this balance and alternates between sharp irony and absurdity, but at the same time produces a claustrophobic, extremely unsettling

atmosphere. Significantly, *Nagonting Har Hänt*, which was commissioned by the Swedish national health authority, was considered to be so controversial that the film was stopped in midproduction – supposedly, the festival catalogue states, ‘such scenes convey too depressing a picture of the world to young people’.

Denne Predstupuji Pred Tvou (*I Daily Appear in Your Presence*, [Czech Republic, 1992]), by Drahomira Vihanová, is a documentary film about a German farmer in a Czech border area, who avoided deportation after the war and stayed in his village. The old man leads a simple life: he cultivates his fields, prepares his meals, lays in his stocks, mends his clothes and goes to church every Sunday. The film is structured by the order of the service, scenes from which alternate with pictures from the man’s everyday existence. The life of the farmer, with its seemingly unshakeable structure, the modest happiness which it has made possible, appear here with such vividness, that one can hardly resist its appeal. Consequently *I Daily Appear in Your Presence* was also the film which received the greatest applause from the public.

Cina (*The Supper*, [Romania, 1992]) by Radu Ionescu, shows the arguments a young couple have while preparing supper. ‘Shows’ is saying rather too much, because the camera is positioned almost exclusively at waist height and catches only a very small area, usually a table or the corner of a piece of furniture, which fades in and fades out again very quickly; little is seen of the people, they are only briefly shown in section. While the first part is dominated by the striking visual aesthetic and the couple’s vociferous arguments, in the second part the couple are seen sitting silently opposite one another and eating the meal. Meanwhile

singing begins on the radio, something like a chant in a football stadium, growing steadily louder: ‘Olé, olé, olé, Ceauşescu is dead’.

This film shows in a witty manner how little gender roles are influenced by the course of history, and how immovably and tenaciously they survive every vicissitude.

Karim Dridi’s film, *Zoë la Boxeuse* (France, 1992), also reflects ironically on gender difference. The story takes place in the nightlife district of the Pigalle, and relates, from a number of very diverse perspectives, something of Zoë’s remarkable life: she has killed her trainer and ex-lover, and has come back to exact further revenge. After her return she lives as Monsieur Albert, in men’s clothes, and last worked as a Father Christmas. The most diverse persons give their views of the affair, but no one knows anything more than rumours; no one knows why she has become a boxer; no one understands her passion, anger and desire for revenge; no one knows why she disguises herself. Her brother despises the shady milieu in which she lives and her lawyer thinks she is mentally disturbed. Many of those questioned are transvestites and only at the end of the film does it become clear to the viewer that, apart from Zoë and her mother, all those involved were men. Between the interviews one repeatedly sees a childhood photograph of Zoë and scenes from boxing matches showing her slight body and the aggression in her face – it is only other people’s comments that turn her into someone incomprehensible. By placing this diffuse story in a demimonde milieu, with its mysterious characters and ambivalent sexuality, the film becomes a kind of game of gender roles.

Heike Klippel

Translated by Martin Chalmers

Two reports on the Screen Studies Conference, Glasgow, 25–27 June 1993.

A conference about historical methodologies is bound to seem a bit like drowning: impressions from the past flash before your eyes but you are not sure what to do with them. Passing before us at the Screen Studies Conference in Glasgow were, for example: accounts by women of the appeal of British female stars of the fifties; references to the beginnings of advertising on British television; an exploration of *Channels for Change* (an early Canadian experiment in community video); the reasons for Bill and Ben in *Watch with Mother*; and a suggestive attempt to illuminate the theories of Marshall McLuhan through a comparison with those of Baudrillard. What is to be done with all of this?

Some of the difficulties about understanding television's past are obvious enough. One paper pointed out how hard it was to write with any authority about so much of British television in the forties and early fifties because there is an absence of recorded material until the end of that decade. Scripts and shooting plans have, therefore, to be relied upon, yet the early years of broadcast television in Britain do need to be studied in order to uncover possibilities that subsequent development may have obscured. A kind of archaeology may be necessary here to reconstruct an evening's viewing from the traces that remain, but how these signs are to be decoded poses another series of questions.

A number of papers offered the legitimate approach of inferring the ideologies and audiences from the modes of address of the text that are available: the advertisements on Independent Television in the fifties, for instance, making clear what women's work was and, at the same time, demeaning it. But if feminist perspectives enable us to see such operations now, how did these texts speak to audiences, and especially women, then?

Another approach, in a different context, took up this question by asking women to write about the appeal of American female film stars in the fifties. This seemed to have produced some powerfully evocative writing which stoically reflected upon the gaps between the utopian identities offered in the cinema and the life experiences since, disavowing neither. Though this gave insight into the past selves of the correspondents, how far does hindsight help us to understand audiences then? What is the relationship between memory and history in this context?

In another session, a research project into the history of Thames Television's current affairs and documentary programmes, lost to viewers when Thames lost their franchise, seemed to be undertaking the awkward task of defining the differences between the two formats. Even more unusually, the researcher was challenging the conventional (male?) treatment of factual television by asking what the emotional, affective power of such television was, and how its production balances the expected concerns for objectivity and fact, *and* a recognition of opinion, with the need to communicate passion and commitment.

Further papers usefully considered the array of assumptions about the audience that lay behind the children's series with the unequivocal title, *Watch with Mother*, and the different positions which appear to be constructed for the viewer across the spectrum of live television. ('Live' television, it was suggested, was better described by the oxymoronic 'fresh frozen').

Not all the sessions were about television and its audiences; some considered conceptually convergent areas from both film and television, or cinema alone. But a recurrent question, usually only implicit in most sessions, was once expressed openly in an old-fashioned way when someone asked a speaker 'But where are you coming from?'

This question gets us to the crux of the conference. Almost every session I attended

offered insights into or provocations about television and its audiences, and a good number of the papers were obligingly brief and well-presented accounts of larger pieces of research in progress. It was also clear, though, that the participants were 'coming from' a range of teaching or research situations, since there is little homogeneity about media studies in higher education, in Britain at any rate. So what ought to have been under discussion in more detail were the methodologies deployed as much as the conclusions reached. In the complex business of examining audience reactions, in the recent or the distant past, what *are* the methods of research which give to a series of perceptive observations from correspondents the status which would enable generalizations to be made about gendered or class readings? Or can it be argued that such responses are symptomatic? Are there ethnographic methodologies, for example, which would be useful here? Is there information based upon audience research that might be, at least, relevant?

In a different vein, are questions about the early years of television being put with the same rigour that now seems to be a feature of film history scholarship? Would *their* conclusions be acceptable to historians of other disciplines? Furthermore, on the occasions when a reading of the text was *proposed*, rather than inferred in relation to the past, traditional notions about the conventions of genre or stylization, and their inflection of meanings, seemed to be displaced by unproblematic assumptions about the transparency of representations across a variety of film or television forms.

The conference did, of course, give some indications that a range of disciplines had shaped the research taking place, but the sessions I attended usually concentrated on the conclusions, when what should have been the critical focus was the relative value and suitability of the methods used. This is not another plea for a key to all the mythologies

of the media, so much as a place to examine which keys are appropriate to which locks, and which locks still do not seem to have any keys at all. Instead, we were merely offered a thoroughly congenial conference which proposed some stimulating ideas, especially the one about what to do with Glasgow's necropolis.

Philip Simpson

I inevitably approach conferences with a mixture of anticipation, reticence and sense of obligation. Another weekend given over to feigning attention as the house gradually subsumes itself under the weight of dirty laundry, and half-finished decorating and complicated childcare arrangements vie with unfinished lectures and postponed meetings. The Screen Studies Conference, however, is fast becoming my yearly fix of current theoretical work/work in progress, as well as being an interesting international meeting ground and a positive boost in the academic wasteland I presently inhabit.

The general consensus of those participants this year returning for the second or third time was of a conference coming into its own: coherent, cohesive and, above all, relevant to current teaching as well as to research. Based this year around issues of History and Memory, the work presented was also relevant to disciplines both tangential to and interlaced with film and television studies.

Which brings me to the question of the participants. *Screen* in its present form may be relatively new but it possesses a long history. It was, therefore, disappointing for me, as a photography lecturer and practitioner, to feel like an interloper in the proceedings. One could cite as positive the high audience participation – two out of three delegates were there to present papers. But academics talking *exclusively* amongst

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themselves has a dubious validity. The increasing tendency here to mimic the US system, which separates practitioners from theoreticians, belies the lengthy struggle in Britain to create photography, film and television courses (at degree level and beyond) which integrate theory and practice; courses, perversely, more often admired outwith this country than internally. It also negates the emerging media education movement, particularly in Scotland, with its attendant drive towards early media literacy as well as conversance with current critical theory.

It was the absence of certain expected groups of participants at its conference that threw into strong relief my questions concerning *Screen's* present role in Britain and, more immediately for me, its contribution to the future of Scottish photography, film and television professional and educational establishments. That *Screen* possesses an international status can be substantiated, in part, by the rush of non-British postgraduate students to add the Screen Conference to their academic cv. The Scottish absences were another matter entirely. I've always assumed that the opportunity for networking offered by conferences was one of their main drawing points. If that holds, there are not a lot of academics and practitioners north of the border interested in ongoing dialogues amongst themselves.

There is an argument that other conferences exist to fulfil those local networking requirements: AMFIT, based in London, holds an annual conference with published papers; the BFI's new Department of Media Education and Research will presumably continue with its varied work and publications; the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) hosts a biennial, photography conference; others could add to the list. I'm not promoting a vision of an homogeneous mass lumbering from one conference to another. Individuals obviously

gravitate towards personal points of reference. I just think it would be in *Screen's* interest, as well as remit, to promote a varied readership through a varied participation in its annual conference.

Screen, in its different forms, has long been in the forefront of debates around critical theory, and has played an important part in the immense change theory has undergone. One of the positive effects advocated was a breakdown of hierarchies within the teaching professions, and wider access across educational institutions for media debate. The total absence of any representatives from schools and colleges of further education at *Screen* conferences is an issue I feel now needs to be addressed.

It is possible that my anxiety about *Screen's* future has more to do with its past and, topically, personal histories. At the recent ACGB Biennial Photography Conference it was noted that *Screen* was no longer 'sympathetic'; to photography. On the one hand, there are precious few British journals that do engage directly with specific photographic issues. *Portfolio* and the intermittent *Ten. 8* come to mind; *New Formations* is cited as worthy of time and attention. On the other hand, the entire ACGB conference this year was mired in photographic essentialism. Will 'photography' survive the onslaught of the New Technology? The *Screen* conference's discussion around technology and discourse, not to mention the arguments about representing the past, would have added a valuable dimension to stale debates.

There were equally instances during the Screen Studies Conference when current photographic debate would have constructively informed sessions: the extensive photographic work on the Family Album could have illuminated the panel on American television and the construction of history/memory; work around the anchoring of news photographs was obviously relevant to some of the ethnicity debates.

Unfortunately, however, photography education's staunch refusal to engage in those crucial debates around media education that *Screen* has consistently published leaves photography in higher education, and professional photographers with a floundering base. Nonetheless, the possibilities for dialogue are immense. It is unfortunate for both 'sides' for such dialogues to be so summarily dismissed.

Screen as a journal is accessible. The Screen Studies Conference, both monetarily and otherwise, is highly accessible. I will return for my yearly fix. Who else is there is a question for *Screen*. Or is it just a question of image?

Mary Ann Kennedy

reviews

review:

Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: a History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. London: British Film Institute, 1992, 381pp.

Ian Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: the North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920-50* (Cambridge Studies in the History of Mass Communications). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 473pp.

Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (Cinema and Society Series). London: Routledge, 1993, 270pp.

SUE HARPER

The history of film criticism in the last twenty years can be interpreted as the demise of one analytical system and the consequent emergence of another: theoreticism has been ousted from centre stage by the new 'revisionist history'. Grand theory had its own explanatory power and coherence, and it did at least alert readers to the complexities of decoding film texts. Grand theoreticians also tended, alas, to be obfuscatory and purist; and they expended much energy in belabouring those films (or writings) which offended their narrow definitions of feminism, Marxism or psychoanalysis. Partly, I suspect, as an exasperated response to this tyranny of theory, a school of revisionist film history emerged in the late 1970s, most notably in the USA. Robert Allen, Tino Balio, Douglas Gomery and others insisted that the most fruitful way to approach film was through its industrial and institutional contexts, and a range of writers addressed themselves to the question of governmental and financial controls. Respectable film scholarship came to be defined primarily as archive-based, and extremely valuable work was done in unearthing and interpreting hitherto unknown documents.

However, revisionist histories tend to be both microscopic and empiricist; and too many are grimly silent on the issues of textual analysis, audience taste or the social function of film. They also frequently ignore the fact that, however rigorously governments attempt to control the business, films frequently contain meanings quite at odds with official desires. At its very best, revisionist history can throw remarkable light on the economic base which lies beneath and partly (but only partly) determines the 'superstructure' of the text. At its very worst, revisionism's desire for neutrality produces a fastidious distance from the films, and at times it is rather like witnessing the painstaking interpretation of a menu by someone who has never tasted food.

The books under review variously engage with, or contribute to, the new historiography. Douglas Gomery's *Shared Pleasures* concentrates exclusively on the exhibition side of the US film business, and it is a major contribution to our understanding of the entrepreneurial practices which resulted in the spread and increase of profits. *Shared Pleasures* marshals a range of sources which is impressively broad, culling material from local and trade journals, Federal and State papers, and studio archives. Exhibition is the third link in the production and distribution chain, and Gomery insists that it is the most crucial for consumers. Paradoxically, though, it is argued that the dynamics of corporate growth in this area are such as to obscure the significance of individual films. A cinema's architecture, its air conditioning, its neighbourhood status, its usherettes, its food outlets, and above all the practice of blind-booking films, make it impossible to ascribe any meaning to the popularity of any one film. According to this explanatory model, audiences are the passive objects of entrepreneurial desires, and their film choices the result of geographical accident, other people's business acumen, and meteorological conditions.

Gomery traces the business from its earliest days of peepshows, travelling canvas exhibitions, vaudeville theatres and nickelodeons. He demonstrates that the national exhibition chain, Balaban and Katz, developed in the 1920s by copying both the innovations of the chain stores and the processes of scientific management. The analysis extends interestingly into the present, with a study of video sales and films made for television. It is conclusively demonstrated that US film exhibition was intimately connected with waves of immigration, the growth of suburbs, and the baby boom. Gomery comments with engaging dryness that in the postwar period people 'chose the psychic advantages of having children over other forms of consumption'. (p. 88)

Shared Pleasures lays out three discrete narratives: of an economic history, of specialized niche markets, and of the consequences of technical change. The sociology of black cinema-going is particularly well conceived. When showmen became restive about the

segregation of audiences in the mid 1950s, Gomery notes with a refreshing lack of sentimentality that this was not due to a flush of liberal humanism: racial segregation was simply getting in the way of profits. Gomery's clear-eyed view of the power of the buck never degenerates into a paean to Americanism or to free trade. It is a pity that this is not true of all revisionist histories.

The remit of Ian Jarvie's *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign* is international trade. Analysing the intersection of diplomatic and economic history, this book is based on an extremely impressive array of official documents. The tables are helpful, and the reproduction of key (and hitherto unknown) papers is very valuable. Jarvie makes an assiduous engagement with state documents, and frequently takes detailed issue with other historians' interpretation of them.

Hollywood's Overseas Campaign explains US dominance of world screens via the two contrasting instances of Canada and Britain. The former took a calculated decision not to contest Hollywood dominance; the latter put up a fight, with disastrous consequences. Jarvie attributes US government policy on film to an enlightened desire for the free flow of ideas and information: the government therefore refused to fetter entrepreneurs in the field. It is established that in the 1940s the State Department was close enough to the cinema industry to consider using its confidential diplomatic codes for the transmission of messages about government support for the marketing of films. Overall, the book marshals material in a scholarly way, and offers a very coherent argument: but there is probably an oversimplification here of the nature of British intellectual elites in the 1930s and 1940s. The alliances drawn up were often, in fact, an unpredictable mismatch between political positions, class interests, and cultural status. Also, a zeal for symmetry should not lead us to present institutions like the Ministry of Information as less heterogeneous than they actually were. Jarvie underestimates the intensity of MoI conflict with the Foreign Office on film matters, and he does not really take account of the subtle developments within Ministry policy as the war progressed. Nor does he grasp, in any detailed way, the nettle of the meanings encoded in American box-office successes, and the relationship of these films to the lives of different national audiences.

Hollywood's Overseas Trade is polemically prefaced by a quotation from D.C. Watt's *Personalities and Politics*: 'the discovery of guilt and the rebuking of sin are exercises in criminology and theology not in historiography'. This is a laudable motto: but the neutrality it enjoins is not evident in the second part of the book, which deals with Britain as the USA's biggest foreign market. Jarvie gives British film culture a sound drubbing. Protagonists from the British cinema of the 1930s and 1940s are castigated for their stubborn defence of a puny industry, for their hubris in thinking that

a substandard product could have any place in the world market, and for their unwillingness to make Westerns. Michael Balcon, whom I have hitherto imagined as a mild-mannered, gentlemanly type, appears here as a ferocious 'ringleader' of opposition to US dominance. Board of Trade officials come in for some stick, especially the hapless R.C. Somervell, whose failings appear to have been a supercilious manner, an Eton education, and the cheek to think that he was the equal of Joseph Kennedy. Simon Rowson, too, is suspect, and the work of F.D. Klingender and Stuart Legg on film finance is discredited because, as communists, 'their outlook on the United States is that of the Comintern in the 1930s'. (p. 330) Moreover most British film historians are presented as tainted by leftism. Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, though given their due as serious scholars, are apparently too parochial and not critical enough of the Association of Cinematograph Technicians. Even Rachel Low is a touch unreliable, because her earlier work was co-authored with Roger Manvell, and 'there was thus a direct connection through him to the anti-Hollywood, elitist film culture that was constructed in Britain between the wars'. (p. 173n) I have not seen so many apparently dead bodies since the last time I went to *Hamlet*.

It is uncertain whether Geoffrey Macnab's *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* can be categorized as revisionist history, since it is written in a lively and often amusing manner. Moreover, Macnab heretically eschews Public Record Office archives, and his material is eclectic and often not verifiable: he has taken the trouble to interview many of the protagonists in 1940s British film production, and been gratifyingly rewarded. Of course, interviewees' versions of events are often partial and suspect: nonetheless, valuable light can be thrown, and an additional strand of historical evidence adduced. The interview material with Anthony Havelock-Allan, for example, is full of new and interesting insights about Independent Producers Ltd. And gossip, unedifying though it might be, does fill gaps left by drier historical accounts. The fact that producer/director Gabriel Pascal, large and hairy as a gorilla, liked to swing through the rings strung across Pinewood swimming baths while yelling out fresh instructions on *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946) makes one think in quite a different way (albeit shudderingly) about the film.

Macnab gives a very interesting account of US animosity to British films, and has a happy eye here for absurdities. The American advertisement for *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* is a treasure of hamfistedness: 'the Lusty Lifetime of a Gentleman who was sometimes quite a Rogue!' In effect, Macnab interprets the Ad Valorem Tax debacle as a direct result of US cultural imperialism. But the problem is that the argument at this point, convincing though it is, is not backed up by a study of official documentation: and so, when compared with other accounts like Dickinson and

1 Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: the Film Industry and the British Government, 1927 to 1984* (London: British Film Institute, 1985); Robert Murphy, 'Rank's attempts on the American market, 1944-49', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), pp. 164-76.

Street's, Murphy's,¹ or indeed Jarvie's, it appears insubstantial. This is a shame, since Macnab clearly has a good grasp of the antecedents and consequences of the crisis over government film policy in relation to commercial production.

J. Arthur Rank does, however, deliver some very useful correctives to received views. For example, it insists that *Caesar and Cleopatra* did do well at the box office: the film simply could not recoup its enormous production costs. This is crucial in establishing a map of audience taste of the period. Macnab also convincingly lays out Rank's early history (he is particularly good on British National, the production company in which Rank and Lady Yule were involved) and scotches the notion that Rank was an amateur who knew little about films. It is argued that the decline of Rank's empire was due to a combination of misplaced innovation and historical circumstance. Such a model inevitably leads to a defence of Rank's financial convictions, and oddly enough, of his second-in-command John Davis as a managerial saviour: hatchet-man though Davis was, he is nonetheless presented here as a 'highly appropriate figure'. The book tends, too, to oversimplify the role of Two Cities production head Del Giudice; and fails to show the ambiguities of writer/producer R.J. Minney's position in the Rank Empire. It is not full enough on the later work of Sidney Box and, at one stage, gives overweening significance to an untypical letter from *Picturegoer*. But these are minor quibbles. Macnab's book is a lively and informative account, and fills important gaps in knowledge about Rank's animation projects, the Charm School, and other aspects of the Rank empire.

review:

Alessandro Silj (ed.), *The New Television in Europe*. London: John Libbey, 1992, 644pp.

Michael Skovmand and Kim Christian Schrøder (eds), *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media*. London: Routledge, 1992, 240pp.

VINCENT PORTER

In recent years, the television systems of western Europe have been undergoing profound change. This transformation, which is irreversible, is part of a broader move by the developed economies to exploit for profit a new natural resource – the electromagnetic spectrum. Under the previous arrangements, which had existed since the end of the World War I, the rights to use the electromagnetic spectrum were licensed by most European states on a parafeudal basis to public broadcasters who were charged with informing, educating and entertaining their citizens. Naturally, the details varied from country to country, but in general the approaches of most countries were the same. The old broadcasting order is now being transformed. The new order is transnational rather than national in scale; and the changes which are taking place are likely to be as profound and epochal as those which followed the enclosures of the common land in late eighteenth-century England, or the clearances which took place in Scottish highlands.

As yet, Europe is only at the beginning of this process, but in both the European Community and the Council of Europe the new regulatory order, which will permit the transnational commercial exploitation of the broadcast spectrum, is being put in place. These new books both seek to take stock of the latest developments in the field of transnational broadcasting. *The New Television in Europe*

sets out to monitor the changes which have been taking place at the corporate and organizational level; while *Media Cultures* seeks to challenge the elitism and cultural pessimism of most Anglo-American and continental attitudes towards transnational media products.

Both books consist of contributions by several authors, and like most publications of this nature, the essays vary in quality. Some break new ground, others simply recycle old material published elsewhere. Some are clearly written, but others are verbose and often impenetrable and difficult to understand. The two volumes also reflect the new transnational media order which they seek to study. Although both are written in English, they are published by transnational publishers, with offices in Paris, Rome and New York, as well as in London. Furthermore, although each volume contains contributions by several authors from different countries, some of whom are British, the editorial perspectives which have organised and shaped these volumes are those of continental Europe, rather than that of the anglo-saxon world. *The New Television in Europe* is predominantly Italian, with financial support from Publitalia '80 and Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest Comunicazioni; while not only do the two editors of *Media Cultures* both lecture at the University of Roskilde in Denmark, but eight out of the ten contributing authors are Scandinavian. The transnational dimensions of these two volumes are no bad thing, however, for they call into question some of the unspoken cultural assumptions of many British writers in the field.

Of the two volumes, *The New Television in Europe* is the more ambitious in scope. In eight major sections, it carries in-depth studies of the changes which have so far taken place in television in Italy, the UK, Spain, France, Germany, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, prefaced by a series of essays about the relations between national broadcasting systems and transnational television. There is not enough space here to analyse in detail those sections which deal with the changes that have already taken place in Europe's major national broadcasting systems. On the other hand, the first section (consisting of no less than seven chapters), which seeks to understand the relations between national television and the new international broadcasting order, is worthy of further comment.

As Alessandro Silj points out in his opening essay, Europe's major commercial groups have deployed a number of different strategies in positioning themselves in the new European marketplace. In part, these reflect their several national and corporate origins; but in part too, they reflect radically different assessments of the nature of the marketplace in which they seek to trade. Thus the huge German company, Bertelsmann, with nearly forty per cent shareholdings in the German commercial television channel RTL-plus and the pay TV channel Première, is carefully building up its catalogue of programme rights and its production base in the domestic market before getting involved in international

coproduction ventures. On the other hand, the French subscription channel, Canal Plus, is seeking to establish a pan-European pay TV presence, and is already heavily involved in projects in Belgium, Germany, Spain and Sweden. The Italian giant Fininvest has also adopted an international strategy; but with the exception of its participation in the Spanish channel Telecinco, its overseas ventures have been none too successful.

All of these media giants, with the exception of the Virgin Group – which has already admitted that it got involved in the television sector in the mid eighties without having a precise strategy – have learned their lessons from the film industry. They have all recognized the importance of investing in programme production in order to compete with their rival channels. But they have different views as to precisely which business they are in, and therefore what values should drive their production strategies. Canal Plus is aiming slightly upmarket, concentrating on cinema films and sports events, which can appeal to several national audiences and can also be broadcast on cable and satellite channels. Fininvest has had a more ambitious strategy, however. This has been to link television programming, via the use of advertising, to the mass audience and thus to the wider European economy. For Berlusconi, the purpose of television is to create a realm of the imagination, which will provide a supporting service for television advertisements. This in turn should sell products or services, generating new investment and thereby stimulating economic growth. Not surprisingly, Fininvest already has its own advertising agency; and it now owns the Standa chain of supermarkets, the biggest in Italy. Thus for Sua Emittenza and his ilk, the new television order is destined to be the ideological motor of Europe's new economic order.

But despite the transnational expansion of the new commercial operators, the dream of a single European media market is as far away as ever. What is developing, both in the sale of airtime and in the field of coproduction, are a series of parallel national markets. In the market for airtime, as Francesco Siliato shows, although the multinationals think globally, they still act locally. Advertisers subcontract to local agencies, partly for cultural reasons, but also because there are different local bargaining practices when selling airtime. In the more developed markets of Italy and the UK, direct bargaining between buyer and seller is widespread; but in France and Spain airtime is still brokered by middlemen, while the Germans are trying to standardize trading conditions by stipulating in their contracts that the media will not offer discounted rates to individual advertisers without making such rates available to all.

In the field of coproduction, the pattern is similar. For most of the new commercial stations, the target market is not another European state but the USA. As Alessandro Silj argues, the favoured

coproduction partner is American rather than European: this gives the new media conglomerates access to the North American market, which is currently short of new product. A similar pattern is emerging with game shows. All over Europe, national broadcasters are making their domestic versions of US game shows. Thus *The Surprise Show* (*Surprise Surprise* [LWT, May 1984–]) is now bringing tears to the eyes of Dutch audiences, and *Wheel of Fortune* (STV, July 1988–) is again on offer to UK viewers via Scottish Television on Monday nights after the *Coronation Street* slot. Indeed, Michael Skovmand offers the readers of his volume a detailed analysis of four different national versions of *The Wheel of Fortune*, the format rights for which are now owned by the Coca-Cola Corporation.

How have the public service channels responded to the new competitive climate? As Michel Souchon shows in his contribution, the new commercial entrants have altered schedules and changed audience loyalties. Commercial channels programme more sports and fiction, but less news and information programmes, than their public sector rivals. In most cases, audiences have welcomed these changes, and the public stations have found themselves between a rock and a hard place. They need high audiences to justify their licence fee revenues; but they need, too, to show that their programming policies are different from those of their commercial rivals. If public service broadcasting is to survive, however, it must offer its viewers services which are qualitatively different from those of its commercial rivals. The prescriptions offered by Anthony Smith in *The New Television* and by Graham Murdock in *Media Cultures* are broadly similar. Whereas the new commercial entrepreneurs may seek to make consumers of us all, the task of the public broadcasters, they argue, is to promote citizenship, through information and education as well as through entertainment.

This is all very well, but is it what we really want from the new media order? To start to address this question, the reader must turn to *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media*. As its title indicates, this book is not concerned with the organisational and structural arrangements for producing transnational media, but rather with the manner of their reception. The media researchers, most of whom come from either Denmark or Norway, set out to challenge the elitism and the cultural pessimism which they consider dominates most Anglo-American and continental European writing. The aim of the editors is to rehabilitate [sic] the serious study of popular culture and to face up to the supposed threat of Americanization of popular culture. They argue, following Preben Sepstrup, that US programmes do not dominate the total supply of European television programmes and that even if US fiction does play a key role in the primetime viewing in all European countries, we know next to nothing about its effect with regard to Europe's

mental, social and cultural future. Rather, it is important to recognise, as David Morley argues in his contribution, that many working-class Europeans have positively welcomed the values of American cultural artefacts, precisely because these were anti-establishment and broke up the oppressive national, social and class values which, until recently, permeated many of Europe's public broadcasting systems. This is understandable, since the television schedules of the public broadcasters, and the programmes which they have produced, have frequently played a key role in structuring and shaping the everyday life of large parts of the nations of Europe. Doubtless this argument has a particular resonance in Denmark and Norway where until recently television broadcasting has been both monolithic in structure and reactionary in content.

A number of the contributors to *Media Cultures* write about films rather than television programmes. In the former medium, not only can the cultural pleasures brought to Europe by postwar Hollywood be clearly identified, it is also possible to cite instances where European films have inspired Hollywood remakes. However, in a thoughtful essay which closes the volume, Kim Christian Schrøder argues that to search for cultural quality, a quest which has informed so much writing on television (including, we might note in parenthesis, the debate over the UK's 1990 Broadcasting Bill), is to search for a phantom. He challenges the common distinction made by many European intellectuals between aesthetically-validated creativity and mass-produced cultural commodities spewed out for mindless consumption. Summoning to his aid Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between 'pure' and 'barbarous' taste, Schrøder calls for a set of cultural criteria which are neither prejudiced against popular taste nor characterized by cultural populism.

Drawing on Fiedler's work in the field of literature, Schrøder argues that a critic should seek through reception studies to assess how a work affects its audiences in three distinct dimensions. These are: an ethical dimension, which triggers in the audience an enlarged awareness of the human condition; an aesthetic dimension, which makes an audience aware of the features and codes, both intra- and intertextual, which have assisted it to resist the temptation [sic] to immerse itself in visual representation; and an ecstatic dimension, which has temporarily released the audience from the bounds of rationality.

However, despite this formulation it is unlikely that Schrøder's wish will be achieved. What popular programmes offer, and what barbarous taste celebrates, is emotion. However the 'pure' taste celebrated by aesthetes and most intellectuals is designed precisely to find ways of stripping the popular of its emotional charge. The television game shows which cross national boundaries are not intellectual and educational shows based on knowledge and skill, but

those which generate emotions in their audiences, through laughter or through tears. If the arguments for the survival of public service broadcasting continue to be based on the rational needs of citizenship, while the main aim of the new transnational media corporations is to celebrate life's emotional pleasures – including those of spending money and acquiring new possessions – then Europe could see a polarization between two very different types of broadcasting: one, transnational and commercial, would celebrate emotion; the other, national and public service, would celebrate reason. Whether that will indeed happen it is too early to say. But meanwhile, Europe's intellectuals still need to find ways of making social, as well as critical, sense of popular television culture, both national and transnational.